

Developing a Humanities Core Curriculum Program in Turkey

Author(s): Benton Jay Komins and David G. Nicholls

Source: *Profession*, (2000), pp. 54-61

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595703>

Accessed: 24-01-2019 15:47 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Profession*

Developing a Humanities Core Curriculum Program in Turkey

BENTON JAY KOMINS AND DAVID G. NICHOLLS

All of us routinely read about the dismal prospects for the humanities in North America: good jobs are few and far between, departments are closing or contracting, student enrollment is declining, and funding for research is withering. This essay is not another tale of gloom and doom. There are places in the world where prospects are good: where there are many new job possibilities, where departments (and universities, for that matter) are opening and expanding, where student enrollment is up, and where research is recognized and supported. As young American scholars starting our careers, we found these opportunities in Turkey; many of our peers have found positions in such places as Australia, Egypt, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Taiwan. If teaching abroad indicates a trend, then the profession needs to consider the ways in which the training of young scholars in North America will be used in various contexts around the globe. We have been occupied by these considerations for the past year; we write in the midst of the spring semester of our first year in Turkey.

In the fall of 1999, we began teaching at Bilkent University in Ankara, founded in 1984 as the first private university in Turkey. Each of us was an applicant for a position in the Department of American Culture and Literature, but the university, hoping to start a new humanities core curriculum program, appointed us jointly in the department and the emergent core. The university had in mind courses based on the core curriculum of Co-

Benton Jay Komins is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Literature and Coordinator of the Program in Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas at Bilkent University. David G. Nicholls is Assistant Professor of American Culture and Literature and Chair of the Department of American Culture and Literature at Bilkent University.

lumbia University and, to a lesser extent, on those of Stanford, Harvard, and the University of Chicago. Meredith Goldsmith, a recent PhD from Columbia, was to coordinate the program, and our schooling (Komins studied comparative literature at Columbia and Harvard, Nicholls studied English at Bowdoin and Chicago) seemed to make us ideal candidates to re-create in Turkey the strengths of American liberal arts curricula. Although we were mindful of the debates surrounding the Western canon and the revision of core programs in the United States, this task was indeed a daunting one. The traditional focus of a core program on the Western canon makes little sense in Turkey, which links Europe and Asia, the West and the Near East, in its cultural and geographic situation. In addition, the country's educational system (which tracks students into fields of study and universities on the basis of a national examination) does not typically include humanities courses in nonhumanistic disciplines. These cultural and institutional factors required us to return to the debates that consumed the American academy in the 1980s. Additionally, we faced the challenge of teaching Turkish students in an English-medium institution (its existence an indication itself of a Turkish desire for globalization). There was considerable urgency to our deliberations, however, since the founding coordinator of the program took another position and we had to prepare a syllabus for the fall term. This essay describes the program we designed, including our expectations of pedagogical and cultural challenges; it also describes the surprises (pleasant and unpleasant) we experienced and the adjustments we had to make. We also discuss the tutorial system we are developing to meet the ESL needs of our students. Finally, we discuss the broader implications for our university's investment in the humanities as we seek to recruit new faculty members and expand the scope of the core program beyond its pilot stage.

We began our work together in the summer of 1999 after we received the notice from the coordinator announcing her departure. Our initial conversations (via e-mail and long-distance telephone) concerned anxieties about pursuing academic careers in Turkey. We were attracted to Bilkent because of its emphasis on research and by the particular challenge of starting a core curriculum. Nevertheless, we had many questions: Would our students possess sufficient skills to read complex historical and philosophical texts in English? What cultural assumptions and expectations would they have? What institutional resources (library, seminar rooms, faculty mentorship, and ESL support) would be available? And would the students understand the value of a core course in the humanities? In addition, we worried about the practical challenges of doing research without the benefit of a major research library and wondered if our distance from North America would isolate us professionally.

Our first challenge was to evaluate the proposal and reading list prepared by the former coordinator. She had done an analysis of various humanities cores and proposed a synthesis of the aims of two well-known courses from Columbia's core: Literature Humanities (which emphasizes literary texts) and Contemporary Civilizations (which emphasizes philosophical texts). Bilkent's administration prefers Columbia's approach, desiring that all students in the university take the same course; unlike Harvard and Chicago, Columbia employs a standard set of texts in order to open a shared intellectual dialogue among all students. As stated in Bilkent's proposal for the course entitled *Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas 1 and 2*, the goals are quite ambitious:

In the contemporary world of violence, human suffering, and ethical problems, we feel it is vital to produce citizens who are well-informed about themselves and their world, who understand their own and other cultures, who respect differences and demonstrate integrity, and who are able to communicate thoughtfully and responsively with others who have different outlooks. We aim to develop imaginative and analytic capacities through the use of texts from diverse times, cultures, philosophies, and religions, and through the development of ideas through discussion, expression, and writing. (“Cultures” 2)

Through an intensive seminar format, the course is expected to expose students to a variety of primary texts grouped thematically in clusters rather than in a historical progression. The proposal notes “the uneasy peace that core curricula have reached with multiculturalism” in North America (2) and encourages a varied selection of primary texts. For example, the first proposed cluster on “government, power, and justice” includes Western classics such as Plato's *Republic* and Niccolò Machiavelli's *Prince* along with the non-Western *Analects* of Confucius. Cluster 2, featuring encounters with Buddhist scriptures, Taoism, and Mevlana (the philosophy of the dervishes), would complement and complicate cluster 1. Because English is a second language for Bilkent's students, the proposal notes that the reading list must not attempt to cover as many pages as the core courses it seeks to emulate.

However, the university administration passed along some additional directives after approving the course proposal: the material on religion was to be omitted in its entirety, and the work of Karl Marx had to be compared with the work of Adam Smith. Further, they proposed exclusive study of complete works by Plato, Machiavelli, John Locke, and David Hume for the first semester. This late directive seemed to contradict the stated goals of the proposal. By devoting exclusive attention to these four authors, the core would emphasize a strictly Western perspective at the expense of the stated aims of cultural diversity and comparison. Moreover, the move to jet-

tison discussion of religious texts and to give students an antidote to Marx by way of Smith smacked of ideological intervention. Strangely, we were being asked to reproduce a canon of humanistic thought that our recent training had taught us to question and revise. Indeed, we found ourselves in a conundrum concerning the nature of cross-cultural communication itself.

As we set out to construct a course syllabus, we sought to reconcile our own intellectual commitments with the goals of the course proposal and the additional requirements of the university's administration. Following the proposed theme of the first semester, communities and coherence, we developed a syllabus that included extensive reading of Plato, Locke, and Machiavelli; in a nod to the original plan, we substituted the *Analects* of Confucius for Hume. (Although we wanted to include other religious texts, we decided to wait until we arrived in Turkey to see why this had been deleted by the administration.) But we wanted to maintain the proposal's stated mission of introducing students to issues of cultural difference. Consequently, we organized the course into six loosely conceived "voyages" that emphasize two kinds of writing about community: major works of political theory, in which an idealized polity is described and argued for, and travel narratives, in which differences between communities are narrated through modes of collection, translation, and discovery. We chose readings from a broad range of geographic and historical contexts. The first voyage examines the terms *civilization* and *culture* and asks students to understand their implications. The course begins with works by Raymond Williams, Fernand Braudel, Sigmund Freud, and Kenneth Clark. A visit to the local Museum of Anatolian Civilizations in Ankara accompanies these readings; there, students respond to a series of questions on how the notion of civilization frames artifacts, enables comparisons between different cultures, and highlights technological innovation. In the second voyage, we make an imaginative journey to the Near East with the Sindbad tales from the *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*. Attempting to bridge cultural differences, a paper assignment asks students to write about Freud's concept of order (highlighted in *Civilization and Its Discontents*) in relation to Sindbad the Sailor's fantastic travels. Voyage 3 moves into ancient Greece; here we discuss *Oedipus Rex*, *The Republic*, and (despite its difficulty) Luce Irigaray's "Plato's Hystera." Through Irigaray, we introduce a feminist perspective and suggest the possibilities of critical rereading. Hoping to juxtapose perspectives from East and West, we planned voyage 4 around the *Analects*, Marco Polo's *Travels*, and Machiavelli's *Prince*. Polo provokes a connection with the next voyage, in which we study Christopher Columbus's "Log-Book," a selection from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Voyages*, and a selection from Beryl Markham's *West into the Night*. We end the semester with Locke's *Second Treatise of*

Government. Locke's analysis of property allows us to reexamine Columbus's assumptions as he came to possess parts of the New World.

We tried to anticipate the particular needs of our students, which we learned would be the sophomore class of the Department of Electrical and Electronics Engineering (EE); this news was both good and bad. These students are among the very best in Turkey, having placed highly on the national examination. But, despite their ability and intellectual curiosity, they do not expect any humanities courses as part of their university studies. Indeed, according to the proposal,

liberal arts education does not have the automatic value in Turkey it is granted in the US, while science is accorded a great deal of respect. Furthermore, like engineering students in many institutions, EE majors may not be fully aware of the value of the humanities, or in fact any nonengineering courses. Instructors may want to think about ways to integrate discussions of science into the curriculum as a way of motivating EE students. ("Cultures" 3)

We chose to emphasize questions of technology and exploration. We were also concerned about the students' heavy course load (six per semester is the minimal requirement) and their ability to read and write in English extensively. Accordingly, we reduced the number of pages of reading and implemented a system of tutorial support. With nearly a hundred students in the sophomore class, the EE department created four sections. We found two tutors for each section from the university's writing center, expecting them to attend all lectures and discussions and to conduct tutorial sessions with smaller groups. This support system would allow the students to work through their difficulties in spoken and written English. In our plan, each tutor would take the dual role of teaching assistant and ESL specialist. With the final syllabus approved by the provost's office and the tutorial system in place, we began the semester.

Despite careful planning, we encountered a number of surprises by the end of the first semester. Many, fortunately, were pleasant. Our students' earnestness, enthusiasm, and conceptual abilities thrilled us; such students are truly a joy to teach. Also, we found excellent support from the EE department and sufficient classroom and library resources from the university. A number of students have excellent spoken and written English and participate actively in class discussions; most students accept, even enjoy, the course, though some complain that it takes time away from their engineering courses. And we learned a great deal about cultural understanding together. For example, Clark's *Civilisation*—an exemplary Eurocentric account—obliquely alludes to the Turks as the “eastern barbarians” who threatened

Constantinople, “the greatest city in the world” (20). In a discussion that followed this reading, we discovered from our students that many Turkish people view Attila the Hun as a deliverer of civilization to the uncivilized peoples of Europe (and not as the bloody butcher that haunts the Western imagination). Our time here has made us aware of how much more we want and need to learn about the history, languages, and cultures of this region.

But, of course, there were unpleasant surprises too. While our students were eager to discuss religion in the classroom, we learned that making religious issues a formal component of the course poses definite risks. The provost’s office told us that both secularists and fundamentalists would vehemently disapprove, since the former uphold the belief that religion has no place in the classroom, and the latter believe that only orthodox Islam should be taught, and certainly not by liberally educated westerners. We decided to bow to this unfortunate political reality, hopeful that we would eventually discover ways to engage our students on these issues. Even though we had pared down the reading load from the proposal, students were often overwhelmed with the length (around thirty pages per session) and difficulty of our selections. We had planned to read the entirety of *The Republic* but were able to complete only three sections over five sessions. Unfortunately, we fell behind and had to drop Machiavelli’s *Prince* from the syllabus. We also found that the tutorial system was not very effective. Because each of us worked with four tutors, communication was decentralized and difficult. Many students viewed the tutorial sessions as optional and did not attend, despite our reminders to the contrary. Some of the tutors had difficulty fulfilling their duties as course assistants and as ESL specialists. Used to running their own show as first-year English instructors, they expected to plan their own lessons and resented our supervision. Unfortunately, their training as ESL teachers did not equip them to present the complexity of the materials; indeed, their ESL training at times compelled them to simplify meanings so that students could master them. This ran counter to the overall project of the course. We hoped that students would come to understand how difficult it is to resolve and master cultural differences. These surprises, good and bad, helped us retool the course for the next semester and for the following year.

The second semester of the core examines the relation of subjects and objects in the context of modern formations of knowledge. As in the first semester, the course is organized into thematic clusters. In an attempt to expand the range of the course, we now include paintings, film, and music along with philosophical and literary texts. Our discussions concern scientific method, theories of origins, commodity fetishism, urban life, and ethnography. Having established a successful dynamic in each seminar section

last fall, we continue to work with the same students. But the tutorial system is much different. Now, each of us works closely with only one tutor; this pairing encourages a collaborative partnership. Recognizing their desire for a degree of curricular autonomy, we ask the tutors to teach one tutorial hour per week that includes a written assignment. These assignments (including response papers, outlines, and drafts of the final paper) are collected into a student portfolio; tutors create the assignments and grade them. Because these assignments amount to thirty percent of the course grade, students now attend tutorials regularly and respect the role of the tutors. Tutors maintain the course Web site and take an enthusiastic role in developing the pedagogy of the course. From the beginning, the tutorial prereading exercises (posted on the Web) have been helping students prepare for class discussion. In the first cluster, we examine the notion of origins through selected readings from Freud, Charles Darwin, and H el ene Cixous. The second cluster, which emphasizes scientific method and its cultural and ethical implications, considers written and painted works by Ren e Descartes, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John James Audubon, Michel Foucault, Diego Vel azquez, and Immanuel Kant; students are referred to the course Web site's visual archive. Urban experience and commodity fetishism concern us in the third cluster. Besides expected attention to works by Marx, Smith, Charles Baudelaire, Roland Barthes, and Walter Benjamin, we examine a short story by the modern Turkish author Haldun Taner. Just as Taner's story brings contemporary Turkish life into our discussion, the major writing project of the cluster asks students to go to the mall to interrogate the role of commodities in Turkish urban experience. The fourth cluster, on dialectical tension, links G. W. F. Hegel, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Frantz Fanon to encounters with musical form (in particular the symphony and call-and-response spirituals). Finally, we explore the connections between surrealism and ethnography through the works of Andr e Breton, James Clifford, and Chinua Achebe and several avant-garde films.

In the midst of the second semester, we find that our changes have been mostly successful. Students complain about the reading load, as before, but tutorial sessions are well attended and the written work has been outstanding. We continue to assess our progress, especially since we know that the program will expand next year to include all sophomores in the engineering faculty.¹ Expansion demands recruitment. The Turkish academy, unfortunately, does not currently produce many humanities scholars with sufficient breadth of training and promise for the international publications that Bilkent requires for promotion. In the same way that the best students are attracted to engineering and the natural sciences, the most active Turkish researchers are in those fields. Our recruitment efforts, there-

fore, focus on the North American job market, where there are many available candidates; we were able to hire several accomplished junior professors who were trained at top research universities.

Our success in attracting top recruits, however, has broader implications for the humanities at Bilkent. Bilkent's Faculty of Humanities and Letters was originally conceived as a teaching faculty; few instructors in the English and American literature departments are active scholars and, because of the youth of the institution itself, there is little mentorship available for junior humanists. The university is making strides in correcting this situation: two years ago, it established a graduate department of Turkish literature under the leadership of Talat Halman, a distinguished senior scholar who came to Bilkent from New York University. To develop further an active research faculty in the humanities, the university intends to establish a graduate department of comparative studies. This interdisciplinary department will house the humanities core, support advanced research and teaching in the humanities, and produce a generation of rigorously trained scholars who, we hope, will raise the standing of the humanities in Turkey.

Before departing for Turkey, each of us worried that taking a job overseas would be construed as a sign of professional failure; we certainly did not want to be seen as foreign freeway (frequent?) fliers. Setting aside these concerns about perceived status in the United States, we find ourselves in the challenging and exciting position of starting new programs and departments, hiring excellent colleagues, and pursuing new intellectual connections in our teaching and research. There are, of course, many difficulties—linguistic, cultural, and institutional. But in the end, we find ourselves intensely engaged with the same issues of cultural difference that structure our course; here, we grapple with difference intimately in our professional and personal lives.

NOTE

¹Readers are encouraged to visit the course Web site for the latest revisions to the curriculum (*Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas Home Page*).

WORKS CITED

- Clark, Kenneth. *Civilisation: A Personal View*. New York: Harper, 1969.
- "Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas." Course proposal. Office of the Provost, Bilkent U, Ankara, Turk. N.d.
- Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas Home Page*. Prog. in Cultures, Civilizations, and Ideas. Bilkent U. 24 July 2000 <<http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~CCI>>.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Plato's Hystera." *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.