

Multicultural Knowledge and Democratic processes

Case of the anti-minaret vote in Switzerland

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Introduction

Under the title: “*Living Together: Globalization, Education and Intercultural Dialogue*”, Associate Professor Joseph Zajda in his article asked a question which should be interesting to everyone living in a globalized world:

How can we contribute to the creation of a more peaceful, equitable, and just society for everyone? He argues that recent global events depicting violence, conflicts and war, demonstrate the need for a more visible comparative education research, which needs to focus more on emerging significant issues in intercultural and cross-cultural understanding globally.

By definition, globalization is a process or a set of processes which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions, generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and power (Held, 1999).

The reason behind the question of Prof. Zajda is that people and countries with similar cultures have been coming together and yet people with different cultures have been and still are coming apart. Political boundaries are increasingly redrawn to coincide with cultural boundaries, that is, ethnic, religious, and civilizational (Sotshangane, 2002).

In addition, populations are crossing the borders whether for short, long or definitive stays, legally or illegally. Some of them are moving by their own choice, others are displaced for different reasons. The face of the world has changed and with it the face of countries. The number of international migrants is estimated at about 214 million people (UN, 2008), or 3.1 per cent of the global population. The number of migrants worldwide would constitute the fifth most populous country in the world.

This new structure of societies, enterprises and even nations has created many tensions and the need is great for adjustment, self-establishment and search for identity.

At present in Europe, one of the great debates is the Islam-centered debate. This debate is not new: it dates back even to the Victorian period. The debate took another dimension after the fall of communism and the second Gulf War. Theories like that of Huntington tried to reshape the world's boundaries according to

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religions/cultures with Islam having the most potential for conflict. The tragic terror acts in September 2001 and subsequent events have helped to fuel the debate and polarize positions. This debate has presented to the champions of a certain vision of conservatism in Europe a golden opportunity to advance their agendas and strengthen their positions mainly on the political arena, locally and internationally.

As a result, recently in Switzerland – on 29 November 2009 - we voted and accepted a law banning minarets despite the fact that out of some 200 mosques or places for Muslim prayers in the country there are only 4 minarets in addition to a fifth one that received a construction permit. The debate was not yet over when another fierce debate has been launched about the burka. A cantonal motion was tabled in the Canton of Aargau against wearing the burka and requiring it to be banned on the national level, again despite the fact that no single woman wears the burka in the canton and only 7-12 women wearing it in the whole of Switzerland (Argauer Zeitung, 6.5.2010).

The debate about this latest Islam-related topic and other relevant issues is not confined to Switzerland. France, Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Spain are raising the subject of burka. Regardless of our position on the question – which is not the issue here- the process itself is leading to extreme positions and a sort of polarization in the society, which could lead to instability and possibly undermine the general framework of human rights in these countries.

What was interesting in this debate was the question of direct democracy as we apply in Switzerland.

A short history of Swiss direct democracy system (history, 2004)

In Switzerland, *direct democracy* has a long tradition: the origins of *direct democracy* can be traced back to the late the middle ages: archaic forms (assemblies of the electorate discussing and deciding major political issues) have been practiced in part of the country since the founding of the Old Swiss Confederacy in 1291.

The origins of Switzerland's modern system of *direct democracy* with formalized opinion polls and frequent *referendums* lie in the experimental phase of democracy in the 19th century when Switzerland was surrounded by monarchies on the European continent that showed little to none enthusiasm for democracy. In the modern times, a partial revision of the cantonal constitution of Zurich in 1865 introduced the so-called "popular initiative" (10'000 voters may demand a change of the constitution) and in 1869 a total revision introduced mandatory referendums for all changes of the constitution and all laws, the election of cantonal government by citizens instead of parliament, the abolition of lifelong posts and a progressive taxation of incomes and fortunes [i.e. rich people have to pay a higher percentage of taxes than poor people]. Other cantons followed Zurich's reforms. In Lucerne, a facultative referendum was introduced (a number of voters may demand a referendum on a new or changed law). In the first partial revision of the Federal Constitution in 1866 only one of 9 suggestions was accepted by a majority of citizens: Jewish citizens were granted the right to settle everywhere in the country (before, they had been restricted to a few areas).

After tragic events in the Canton of Ticino, two revisions of the cantonal constitution in 1891 and 1892 redesigned the organization of constituencies and introduced election of a larger number of members of parliament per constituency in proportion to the number of votes given to the parties. Proportional elections were introduced in the Canton of Neuchâtel in 1891 as well, but this time it was conservatives that would profit.

On the federal level several approaches to introduce the proportional election mode failed. First the right to popular initiatives (50,000, nowadays 100,000 voters can demand a referendum on a change to the constitution, known to several cantons since 1865) was introduced on the federal level in 1891. And this was used in 1918 to finally bring about the proportional election mode on the federal level. This dramatically influenced the outcome of 1919's elections.

The bottom line is that direct democracy gives the citizen the right to express him/herself directly over the subjects of interest. The system is very open since it allows every one to launch discussions and debates about topics of interest leading to popular vote.

This system represents the most democratic form of citizen's contribution; it takes a large part of the political decisions out of the hand of "professional and career politicians", something which –in many countries- makes politics the concern of a small caste, and consequently the distance between the political professionals and the normal people never ceases to widen (Kilgour, 1994).

Despite that, Switzerland is nevertheless still a representative democracy. Most laws are made and decided by parliament. The important difference, however, between the Swiss system and the "indirect" democracy of Britain is that citizens are entitled to put almost every law decided by their representatives to a general vote - if they want. (Telegraphe, 2007)

Critics of the Swiss system argue that it undermines and weakens representative government, and that placing power in the hands of the people can threaten the rights of minorities in society. This was studied and analyzed in several studies which indicated that: " *Die indirekte Wirkung der Volksrechte auf den parlamentarischen Prozess bleibt gerade im Bereich der Minderheitenrechte meist unberücksichtigt*" (the indirect impact of people's rights on the process of parliament remains especially in the case of minorities' rights unconsidered) (Christmann, 2010-own translation)

It is also argued that many voters do not have sufficient understanding to make informed decisions about referendum issues, especially in the case of complex constitutional issues (Kilgour, 1994). Voter's education and campaign information are therefore significant issues in relation to direct democracy (ACE).

This confirms that right and privilege are linked to a responsibility as it is the case with each delegation. The right to decide about something is linked with understanding the issue in order to make the best choice.

If knowledge is so important for taking a decision, did the Swiss population have enough information about the issue of the anti-minaret vote of November 2009? Did the population know basic facts about Islam far from common stereotypes?

Knowledge about Islam and the Anti-Minarete vote:

Background:

What did voters know about the issue and Islam as a religion, as a system, as a history and as a culture and what did they know about Muslims?

Muslim's lack of resources and unity and some other factors related to the position of the government and official institutions made their voice inaudible and almost not existing. Therefore it would be interesting to understand the relation between the level of knowledge and the result of the vote, since the influence of Muslims was so little in the debate.

I am here not to analyze these aspects of the campaign. I would like to bring up a personal experience. Because –in my opinion-, personal experience is the most appropriate channel to bring some of world's realities to the knowledge of interested people far from dry numbers and positions.

I grew up between an Arab Muslim father and a Swiss Protestant mother and learned in a Catholic missionary school. The seven languages which I know have been learned –except the first two- through my stays, travels and professional activities around the world.

About ten years ago, I started to teach intercultural management for International MBA students. My major domain was, and still at Zurich University for applied sciences, is the Islamic World and the Middle East, including culture and finance.

Such courses came to be introduced in education through the recognition by educational institutions of the changes in today's world. In that light, they started to propose programs to satisfy the needs expressed by business and political worlds as well as those of international organizations where teams and persons of different origins are working together.

As a person, my motivation –beside the professional interest- was to transmit to interested persons, based on my experience and knowledge, the essence of dealing and behaving as well as understanding the issues related to the multicultural world which we claim to be global, small and interrelated.

During this period, I used to start my seminars with a questionnaire of 14 questions about the Islamic world and culture. The objective was to pull the information from the students, to show them what they may or may not know and to provide them with an introductory tool for evaluating their advance during the seminar. It also helps me as lecturer to evaluate the level of the class and adapt my content to their level.

Without having ever had the intention to develop it into a study, I collected the questionnaires and, seven years later, I discovered after that I have a large collection of data.

The results of this collection are presented here to respond in a close-to-scientific-method to the question: do the well educated Swiss electorate understand Islam and consequently the issues related to it in way to be able to decide for example whether a minaret is a religious object or not, is it a symbol or an ornament or a religious requirement?

The research:

The conditions:

The questionnaire was distributed to students from the end of 2003 on. Students had at the beginning of the seminar 7 minutes to complete the questionnaire. They were not required to inscribe their names on the questionnaire so to let them express themselves freely. It was not checked if students helped each other or not. The students didn't know that this questionnaire might be used in a research – since this was not planned at the beginning-.

Both the questionnaire and answers were in English, and although some of them answered in German their answers were accepted.

Composition of students:

The first 3 years: the questionnaires were distributed to International MBA students in a university of applied sciences in the region of Zurich. The latest 4 years, they were International MBA and Bachelor students from institutions in Zurich, Bern, Geneva and Liechtenstein. All students were studying parallel to their professional activities. For the MBA students, the average age was 33.5 years, and for the second group it was 24.5 years. The origin of the student was Swiss for about 80% of them. The proportion of Swiss with migration background is unknown.

The majority of the students (71%) were men.

The total number of students who participated in the exercise is 386 students.

The content:

The questionnaire is presented in annex 1.

The number of considered questions was 13 questions of very simple and superficial level: every person interested in or aware of international issues should be able to answer them right away.

The questions were related to: Old history, modern history, Islamic cultural characteristics, Muslim countries which are of experience or interest and Islamic business. An additional question was asked about the most important stereotypes which they know about Muslims.

One question was not included in our evaluation since it was related to expectations from the seminar.

The results:

Each right answer was given 1 point.

2-part questions were given one point for two right answers and half a point for one right answer.

One question had a three part response. Two right responses gave one point.

No differentiation was made between not answered or wrongly answered questions

Answers like Allah or Mohamed as historical personalities were not considered right answers, since one is wrong and the other is too obvious, some classes were warned about, but not all.

The detailed results are presented in annex 2.

We are going to analyze the set of data twice: first with the full data, secondly with the knowledge related data only.

1) Full set of Data (All questions included):

The summary of the results is presented here below:

SUMMARY 1 OF INVESTIGATION 2003-2010

Regions covered: Zurich + Bern; 1X Liechtenstein + 1X Geneva
approx. 65% MBA and 35% BBA International
Students Business or Management

Total Participants		386		
Questions	Tot. Points earned	Max. Possible points	% of right answers	
Historical personality	58.5	386	15.16%	
Modern personality	167.5	386	43.39%	
place visited/read	306.5	386	79.40%	
historical event	54.5	386	14.12%	
modern events	77.5	386	20.08%	
Sunni/Shia	113	386	29.27%	
Arab muslims	168	386	43.52%	
Islamic culture	141.5	386	36.66%	
characteristics of muslims	190	386	49.22%	
islamic countries ot visit	288.5	386	74.74%	
things/terms to Islam	158.1	386	40.96%	
Things/terms islamic				
business	52	386	13.47%	
Stereotype	199.5	386	51.68%	
Total	1975	3088	63.96%	

In this list we see that the lowest score was made regarding business and historical questions with respectively 13.47%, 14.12% and 15.16%.

The percentage of right answers for all involved students was 63.96%.

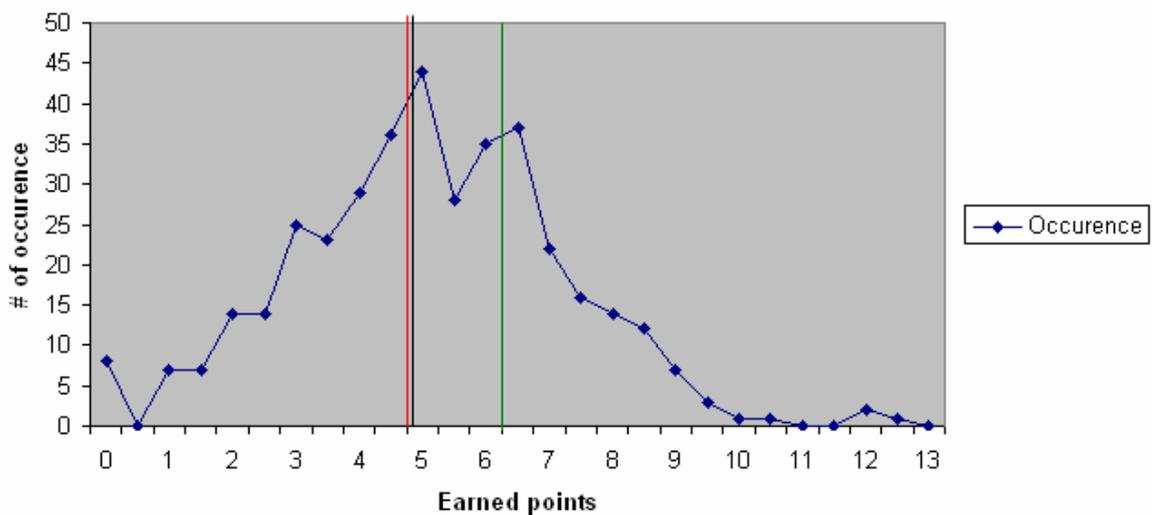
The analysis by topic will be done later.

Looking at the scores, we can gather the right responses as in the following occurrence list (13 questions, which means 13 max possible earned points):

Points earned	Occurrence
0	8
0.5	0
1	7
1.5	7
2	14
2.5	14
3	25
3.5	23
4	29
4.5	36
5	44
5.5	28
6	35
6.5	37
7	22
7.5	16
8	14
8.5	12
9	7
9.5	3
10	1
10.5	1
11	0
11.5	0
12	2
12.5	1
13	0
Check	386

This list will give us the following distribution:

Distribution of earned points with all questions



(Red: median, black: Mean, Middle value $13/2=6.5$). These figures are from the following analysis:

Values	Description	Prctg
386	Total number of participating students	
12.5	Max points earned	
0	Min points earned	
12.5	Range of earned points	
5.00	Median	
179	Number of students over the median value	46.4%
163	Number of students below the median value	42.2%
44	Number of students equal to Median value	11.4%
5.117	Mean Value	
179	# of students with earned points Equal or over Mean	46.1%
207	# of students with earned points Smaller than Mean	53.9%
116	Students passed with all questions (knowledge and others)	30.1%
270	Students Not passed with all questions (Knowledge and others)	69.9%

From this analysis one can conclude that the number of student who would have passed the exam, if the score for being successful is 6.5 would only be: 30%. The distribution is skewed positively which means that the number of the scores on the left side is more than the number on its left. In our case this represents a lack of right answers.

2) Data set with only knowledge questions:

But the above results are not really reflecting the right situation of knowledge, because some questions are not knowledge information but just informative, like the ones related to places visited, or intended to be visited and the question related to stereotypes.

SUMMARY 2 OF INVESTIGATION 2003-2010

Regions covered: Zurich + Bern; 1X Liechtenstein + 1X Geneva
approx. 65% MBA and 35% BBA International
Students Business or Management

Total students involved				
	386			
Questions	Tot. Points earned	Max. Possible points	% of right answers	
Historical personality	58.5	386	15.16%	
Modern personality	167.5	386	43.39%	
place visited/read	0	386	0.00%	
historical event	54.5	386	14.12%	
modern events	77.5	386	20.08%	
Sunni/Shia	113	386	29.27%	
Arab muslims	168	386	43.52%	
Islamic culture	141.5	386	36.66%	
characteristics of muslims	190	386	49.22%	
islamic countries ot visit	0	386	0.00%	
things/terms to Islam	158.1	386	40.96%	
Things/ terms islamic				
business	52	386	13.47%	
Stereotype	0	386	0.00%	
Total	1181	3088	38.23%	

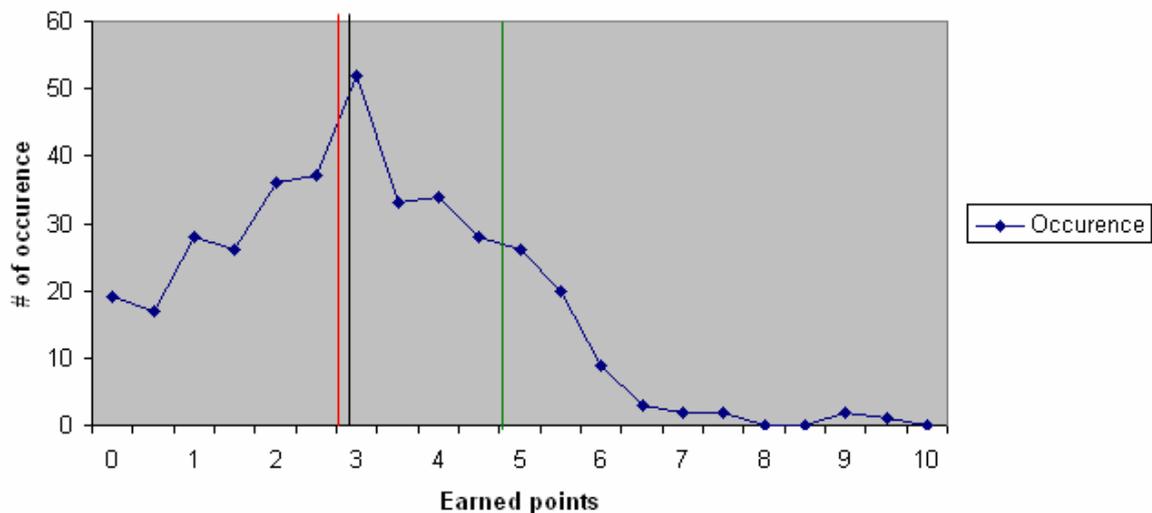
This means that only 38% of the knowledge questions were rightly answered (compared with previously 63.9%).

Looking here at the scores, we can gather the right responses as in the following occurrence list (only 10 questions which means 10 max possible earned points):

Earned points	Occurrence
0	19
0.5	17
1	28
1.5	26
2	38
2.5	38
3	53
3.5	36
4	34
4.5	30
5	26
5.5	21
6	9
6.5	3
7	2
7.5	3
8	0
8.5	0
9	2
9.5	1
10	0

Check 386

Distribution of earned points with all questions



(Red: median, black: Mean, Middle value $10/2=5$). These figures are from the following analysis:

Value	Description	Prctg
386	Total number of participating students	
9.5	Max points earned	
0	Min points earned	
9.5	Range of earned points	
3.00	Median	

167	Number of students over the median value	43.3%
167	Number of students below the median value	43.3%
52	Number of students equal to Median value	13.5%
3.071	Mean Value	
167	# of students with earned points Equal or over Mean	43%
219	# of students with earned points Smaller than Mean	56.7%
67	Students passed with all questions (knowledge and others)	17.4%
319	Students Not passed with all questions (Knowledge and others)	82.8%

Here we see that only 17.4% of the students would have passed the exam if it were one. This is a clear indication that the amount of knowledge is very low. The distribution is also positively skewed indicating that scores are bunched at one end (the lowest scores).

Let us analyze the results according to the topics. After grouping the question according to domain, we can discover the domains where the answers were of poor level:

Total earned points for each Topic	Max possible points	Percentage of right answers	Topic
113	772	14.64%	history
245	772	31.74%	modern
595	772	77.07%	geo
158	772	20.47%	religion
281	386	72.80%	population
331.5	772	42.94%	culture
52	386	13.47%	Islam Business
Analysis of Stereotypes			
Answers		Percentage of total answers	Subject of stereotype
146.5		73%	Terror
44		22%	Women mistreated
4		2%	All Muslims are religious
5		3%	Other
		100%	Total

This shows that the domains history and business are scoring poorly. Religion and modern history are scoring low with 20.48% and 31.74% respectively.

It is interesting to see that the principal stereotype was that Muslims are terrorists or have a tendency to be terrorists or are supporting terror, with 74% and that over the 6 years of investigation (all after 9/11.2001). In the latest period the tendency of choosing the stereotype of Muslims mistreating or limiting the freedom or Islam as anti-female system was increasing. However the total score reached 22%.

Some possible critics to the questioning process:

The study come short in linking the level of knowledge about Islam with the strength of the campaign, since the lack of knowledge, leads voters to look for the

media. As we mentioned above the anti-minaret campaigners were much more present during the campaign.

The study couldn't show the changes in the level of knowledge due to the fact that not all questionnaires were dated (they were also anonymous).

Some questions were over the time reformulated in a way to make them more comprehensive, since not every respondent had English as mother tongue.

Conclusion:

First of all, we can't consider this study as a precise scientific one. It is just an indication of a certain situation. As was said, the collection of the information was originally not designed for this purpose. Anyhow, it gives us an idea about the possible level of knowledge about Islam and Muslims among educated, young, internationally interested.

The importance of these results lies in the point we mentioned earlier: the importance of the link between the level of knowledge and the process of direct democracy.

A good, responsible vote is one based on enough information.

That is true that the Swiss government provides every voter with a catalogue of arguments included in the vote documents, but these arguments are just the political argumentation, like the importance of respecting human rights, freedom of religion, the danger/advantages of voting so or so, etc. This doesn't give the normal average citizen information about the issue, it doesn't give him or her the possibility to differentiate between cultural and religious aspects, between Muslims and Islam, between Muslims groups and so on (The issue is the same for almost all voting subjects). These pieces of information are essential in an issue that is related to culture, integration, human feelings. That is not the same as voting for a budget where numbers are essential.

Here we may ask a legitimate question: if educated students who are internationally interested, partially well experienced and working in the middle-management level in different industries have this level of knowledge and information, what would be the knowledge level of Mr. or Ms. Lambda about the same subject?

It was claimed at the beginning of this paper that the link between the level of knowledge and the democratic process is essential for the success of the process and hence to the political stability and the social peace in a given society.

We can definitely, based on these results,, assume that the level of knowledge played a big role in the results of the vote. The aftermath of the vote corroborates that claim, since every political party in Switzerland discovered that it can win votes in the next election in 2011 if it deals with topics related to Muslims (since it is also linked to migration and domestic and international security, two leading subjects). At the same time, on the side of the Muslims, there is a certain radicalization of the positions expressed in different manners like the establishment of the Central Islamic Council. These movements may lead to a polarization of the Swiss politics opening the doors for tensions.

After discovering one of the major roots for such eventual tension, we may advance the idea that a multicultural education for Swiss citizens as well as for immigrants –which is out of our scope here- would be a good step toward such a de-escalation.

The business world discovered since the first days of globalization and established programs for cultural awareness and training for expatriates and so on, why wouldn't it be possible to also extend that to schools and education centers.

Does that influence the issues in a democratic process? How much does that influence this process?

For the future and next stages of this study, we can imagine measuring the impact of the knowledge on the direct democratic process. This could be done by a systematic follow-up of the development of knowledge among a set of population and the democratic process in relation to one specific subject.

It would be interesting to move the research further with more rigor in order to classify the respondents, to link the answers to dates and events happening belonging to the questionnaire, to compare the level of knowledge before and after the seminars, in order to evaluate the impact of getting more information about the subject on the personal behavior and opinion and it would be interesting to compare the results of the investigation with a parallel investigation conducted among a representative set of population.

It is important for our democratic system and to its sustainable development to study all the possibilities and channel to reinforce it in a global environment where multiculturalism is the common characteristic.

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Annexes:



Small Investigation ...

1- Questionnaire:

	Name (facultative): Date:		
1	1 Historical Islamic Personality (older than 100 years ago)		
2	2 Modern Islamic Personalities (actually living or died within the last 20 years max.)		
3	Place(s) you read of it / visited in Islamic World		
4	1 Historical Event in Islamic World (older than 100 years ago)		
5	2 Modern Events in IW (less than 100 years ago)		
6	Which Muslim group of population is the most numerous: Shi'a or Sunni ? Arabs are more numerous or Muslims?	Sunni Arabs	Shi'a Muslims
7	2 Items of Islamic culture you like, which one?		
8	2 Characteristics of Muslim people you know about		
9	Islamic country(ies) you would like to visit or visit again		
10	Name 3 Things or Terms related to Islam in general		
11	Name 2 things or terms related to Islam and Business		
12	Name one major stereotype you know about Muslims/ Islam		
13	Three major objectives you want from this seminar		

