

## **Literature and Cultural Studies Program at the Hashemite University in Jordan: An Appraisal**

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### **Abstract**

It is argued that “cultural studies” enables individuals to better understand not only their own culture, but also their own contributions to it, that it fosters a unique set of critical, analytical, and communicative skills in students, and that it is in great demand in today’s world. In response to the increasing interest in cultural studies all over the world, the Department of English at the Hashemite University, similar to foreign language departments in the West, has developed a program titled “Literature and Cultural Studies” whose assessment is the focus of this paper. The discussion demonstrates that this program emphasizes literature as a means of cultural expression, introduces students to several cultures and literatures, aims to develop the students' English language competency and communication skills, fails to address all cultural phenomena, and badly needs revision for the purpose of including other basic courses that make it better prepared to play an important role in the University's general education mission. It has been demonstrated that the program of Literature and Cultural Studies meant to foster the critical, analytical, and communicative skills in learners is lacking in many ways. It lacks a few courses on film theory, film genres, painting, music, etc. It also lacks an introductory course on cultural studies that have been gaining currency.

**Keywords:** Cultural studies, foster, skills, in great demand, firm footing, multidisciplinary, myriad problems, assess.

### **I. Introduction**

The survey of literature demonstrates that this study succeeds another one of mine titled “American Studies at The Hashemite University” that was published in *American Studies Today Online* in 2014. While the first study provides learners with more information about Americans, which facilitates judging them objectively, the second study about the Program of Cultural Studies is an appraisal. It evaluates the worth of this program at The Hashemite University. In addition to this study, another cultural study written by Ahmad Mahasneh and titled “The Level of Moral Competence among Sample of Hashemite University Students” was published in *Canadian Social Science* in 2014. Mr. Mahasneh has distributed a questionnaire that was given to 909 students. The results demonstrate that students have a medium level of moral competence. To revert to my study that deals with the cultural studies program, the significance of this study lies in its being the only one of its type. It is an assessment. Even though it is descriptive, it contributes to literature as it shows the merits and

demerits of this program that focuses on teaching students about various cultures because studying other cultures helps them with developing a sense of mutual understanding, minimizing differences, learning from others' experiences, accepting diversity, and maximizing cooperation. Studying other cultures also teaches them that humans have many things in common, which furthers understanding and dialogue. As far as the review of literature is concerned, I have come across three new books published by Cambridge Scholars. Whereas *The Logics of Change* was published in 2012, the other books were published in 2015. These books are related to the Cultural Studies Program at The Hashemite University. The first one is titled *Worlds Apart*. It is written by Christina Sandru who interrogates the extent to which post-colonialism can help illuminate instances of imperial domination in non-Third World contexts. Sandru claims that colonization should be understood as a condition of ideological domination. This argument about domination negates understanding and emphasizes humans' selfishness. It shows that domination occurs in different ways that certainly do the colonized harm. This domination is not limited to exploiting resources, confiscating freedom, and giving the colonized a tough time. It also involves imposing certain concepts and ways of thinking on the colonized. The relation between this book and the Program of Cultural Studies is that it has courses that concentrate on colonization and its grave consequences, such as African Literature and Third World Cultures in which the discussion is certain to focus on imperial powers. Other courses such as Globalization and Cultural and Literary Globalization also focus on ideological domination. The second book is titled *The Logics of Change: Poverty, Place, Identity and Social Transformation*. It is edited by Elisabeth Kapferer, Andreas Koch and Clemens Sedmak. This book deals with change that ranges from small to big, local to global, individual to societal, and from subtle to sudden. Change often comes unexpectedly, but people can also be catalysts for it. This change can be either for the better or the worse. The keyword in the second book, change, represents the real reason underlying the development of this sort of program at the University. This program has been designed to effect a change for the better, and to make a difference. The third book is titled *In Permanent Transit: Discourses and Maps of Intercultural Experience*. It is edited by Clara Sarmiento, Sara Brusaca, and Silvia Sousa. This book builds interdisciplinary approaches to the study of migration, traffic, globalization, communication, arts, literature, and other intercultural processes, in the context of past and present times. It also offers a convergence of perspectives, combining conceptual and empirical work by sociologists, anthropologists, historians, linguists, educators, lawyers, media specialists, and literary studies writers, in their shared attempt to understand the multiple routes of the intercultural experience. These multiple perspectives as well as the interdisciplinary nature constitute an important connection between this book and the Cultural Studies Program at The Hashemite University. The affinity between the afore-mentioned works and the Cultural Studies Program at the University clarifies the significance of cultural studies that are gaining currency and becoming central to understanding others, maintaining harmony, and living peacefully. Despite this argument about harmony, humans these days are suffering from a cultural crisis manifest in the acts of violence perpetrated all over the world, the overuse of the internet, the disagreement over universal values, and the divisions connected with religion, gender, and class. These divisions and the ensuing tensions demonstrate the dire need for "cultural studies" that seems to be the panacea for humans' problems as it enables us to understand not only ourselves, but also others. In support of this view, it is maintained that "[as] contemporary society has become opaque to most citizens, what is in shortest supply is the kind of knowledge and skill that enables citizens to "read" their own environments, to understand their own multiple contributions to the shaping of those environments, and to interrogate their own mindsets" (Ien Ang: 1). Comprising the panacea, "cultural studies can enable individuals to better understand their own culture, "and"... to look at and analyze culture without previous prejudices" (Kellner, 2008:11-12). Kellner also adds that cultural studies can be effective if it is "critical, multicultural, and multi-perspectival". In favor of this view, it is argued that cultural studies "lacks an established methodology and even a well-defined object" (Frow and Morris, 1993:1).

## **II. The Affinity between the Cultural Studies Program at the Hashemite University and American Universities**

As far as methodology is concerned, cultural studies is multicultural, and multi-perspectival. These two characteristics are true of the Cultural Studies Program at the Hashemite University, which is not the only university in the world to develop a program of this type. Many top American universities have cultural studies programs, such as University of California, Davis, California State University, Los Angeles, Colorado State University, George Mason University in Fairfax, University of Illinois, Chicago, Brown University, New York University, University of Pittsburg etc. The value of these programs is that they provide a framework for multidisciplinary exploration by drawing on humanities and social sciences. The key field of study and analysis in all of them is culture that defines humans, and determines what they eat, wear, live, design, express their feelings, build their houses, etc.

At the beginning, I'd like to say that culture is more than a set of traditions, a type of food, a text, a belief, and fashion. It is the means by which we can understand the reasons behind people's behaving in a certain way. It is "integral to and constitutive of social life, not something outside of or a mere addition to it" (Ang, 2016:1). It is connected with how the world is run, with politics. Stewart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1976) Culture is defined as the shared principles of life characteristic of particular classes, groups or social milieu. Cultures are produced as groups make sense of their social existence in the course of everyday experience." (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Culture is intimate, therefore, with the world of practical action. Since, however, this everyday world is itself problematic, culture must perforce take complex and heterogeneous forms, not at all free from contradictions (10-17). By virtue of these forms, culture has become popular due to the "increasing importance of cultural industries to post-industrial national economies, such as the US and the UK" (During, 1993:26), the use of cultural heritage and consumption to maintain identities, and the downsizing of the "academic humanities and the social sciences relative to other faculties inside a still expanding post-compulsory education sector" (26).

## **III. Appraisal**

"Literature and Cultural Studies" at the Hashemite University that principally concentrates on studying cultures is a young multidisciplinary program that has come into existence in response to the increasing interest in cultural studies which is becoming the cynosure in the West. This is a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree program that is offered for the first time in Jordan. Though young, the program is establishing a firm footing. The full-time faculty members devoted to this program are hardworking, creative, and patient. They work tirelessly and grapple with problems on their own. The efforts they make have been responsible for the rising enrollments and the success achieved. "Literature and Cultural Studies" Program at the Hashemite University came into existence, crowning great and tireless efforts exerted by few professors of literature and language who worked day and night to do something that would make their institution distinguished not only from other institutions in Jordan, but also from similar ones in the Arab World. Being one of the professors involved in this program, I recall talking a number of times to parents and new students about it, comparing and contrasting it with the other program on English Language and Literature, and giving those asking me about it a few reasons for its being as good as the other program, but probably more difficult than it is. I also recall writing more than once, upon the request of the Chairman of English Department, to the university president, introducing the program, explaining the rationale, and suggesting that the program be publicized, that tuition fees be lessened to encourage enrolments, and that the average of new students joining the program be reconsidered. Just as I was involved in this program since its inception, so also have I been involved in teaching many subjects, such as American literature, French literature, English literature, African literature, Arabic Culture, American Culture, American Studies, Introduction to Western

Thought etc. While teaching these subjects, I find myself talking to students who have trouble with reading the assignment, using grammatical structures well, speaking and writing. In brief, students with these troubles are incompetent and should join another department. Even though I keep advising them to work harder, the few listen, but the many don't. I have been wrestling with this problem for more than eight years. My colleagues are also suffering. We are all certain to go on suffering because my former suggestions have been disregarded. Accepting our fate and believing in the possibility of effecting a change for the better, my colleagues and I go on working on our own, maintaining patience, and facing myriad problems which are probably connected with its being a new program. "Literature and Cultural Studies" at the Hashemite University is the first program to be offered not only in Jordan but also in the Arab World. It is an interdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts degree program that responds to the growing interest in cultural studies that focus on cultural phenomena in various societies. It facilitates students' acquiring a solid grounding in English and studying topics such as cultural theory, globalization, cultural interaction, etc. It also helps students with understanding the cultural diversity and learning about the differences between one culture and another with the purpose of bridging these differences, and living with them not for them. Moreover, this program broadens students' personal horizons, develops their English language competency and communication skills, and deepens their understanding of people of different cultures. In short, the program has two main strands of which the development of English language skills is one and the introduction to cross-cultural practices, critical theory, and globalization issues is another. These objectives are achieved by introducing learners to several cultures such as American Culture, Arabic Literature and Culture, German Literature and Culture, French Literature and Culture, African Literatures and Cultures, Cultures of the Third World Countries, Southern American Cultures, and English Literature and Culture. Students also delve into specific topics in comparative cultural studies, and select courses outside the English Department to pursue interdisciplinary study in areas, such as anthropology, philosophy, history, modern languages etc. Students should also enroll for practical skills classes embedded within the core curriculum, such as reading, advanced reading, writing, advanced writing, research writing, and listening and speaking. A careful examination of the course work reveals that it focuses on literature due to its being a form of cultural expression. This examination also demonstrates the need for a great number of teachers. In fact, many full-time faculty members are devoted to this program. They specialize in comparative literature, linguistics, sociology, psychology, religion, history and gender issues. They all do their best to help students acquire the necessary skills which make it easy for them to communicate with others, and judge them from the perspective of their own cultures, which is the only way to do them justice. When these students graduate, they do several jobs. Some of them work as journalists; others work as translators. Some of them may also find careers in banking and foreign embassies. The majority practice teaching. So far I've met some of them and they are pleased with their jobs.

#### **IV. Reasons for Offering this Program**

As regards the reasons underlying the choice of this program, they are legion. One of these reasons is that by offering such a multidisciplinary program the University emphasizes its uniqueness and attracts a great number of students, especially those who are curious and desirous of trying something new. Another reason is that this major increases the University income because each credit hour costs JDs. 30, which is a good amount of money in the country. It is this intention that underlies the University President's refusal to reconsider the tuition fees which have been blamed for creating financial problems for parents and students alike. A third reason is that these cultural studies programs have been the cynosure in the West, which makes it easy for graduates planning to go on with their post-graduate studies to join a university abroad and start working toward their M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in different areas. A fourth reason is that cultural studies combines many interrelated disciplines whose study helps students with developing a larger perspective of the world, and becoming more

experienced than they are. By virtue of this consciousness, students realize that cultural phenomena (art, literature, science, technology, media, etc.) are all related to issues of class, gender, race, and power though they seem to be autonomous and disparate. These students also learn that just as globalization cancels geographical borders, so also does cultural studies transcend disciplinary boundaries, drawing upon many disciplines and cultural practices. This characteristic is significant. For one, it shows that cultural studies acts as an umbrella sheltering many styles, themes, disciplines, and concerns. This multiplicity obviously provides an indication of richness, strength, and distinction. For another, this state of being multidisciplinary also demonstrates that cultural studies is something of a container that contains many deeply-connected disciplines and cultural forms such as films, media, advertising, music, and television. In this sense, cultural studies encompass a variety of perspectives and approaches "gleaned from the humanities and social sciences" (Howley, 2002:2). This program has not offered online courses so far. The professors at the department are planning to do so. Most of them have attended training courses on how to offer a course on line, but they haven't begun doing that probably because of the lack of equipment. Some professors still lack computers and so do students. Another reason for this postponement is connected with students who still have trouble with English and consequently, they won't be able to communicate with others, be they their own mates or instructors. Unfortunately, the number of these students is great, which constitutes a difficulty whose surmounting is certain to take much time.

## V. Conclusion

I hope I have introduced this program that emphasizes just one form of cultural expression. There are other forms of expression that the program fails to address. Before two years, I added three more courses to the study plan. The first course is Media; the second one is Film Studies; the third one is Literature and Other Disciplines. Despite these good additions to the plan, two more classes on music and painting are lacking. There is no introductory course on cultural studies, either. A course of this sort consists, I think of a critical study of modern culture and its main topics, such as visual art, film, music, literature, television and other popular media. In line with this argument I suggest that a course titled "Cultural Studies: An Introduction" be added to the study plan. I also suggest adding a second course that examines the relationship between music and culture. To these courses a third one on art and its history should be added. The value of this subject lies in examining the social and cultural influences that shape the perception, understanding, and evaluation of art, which is an important cultural expression. Topics in this course may include western visual art from the Renaissance up to the Present. In addition to all that has been said, I suggest adding two other courses titled "Understanding Movies" and "Film Genres". Whereas the first course focuses on the conventions and contexts of fiction films, including a brief history of their development from the silent era to the present day, the second one explores and analyzes film genres and the cultural contexts which inform their appeal, such as action films, documentaries, science fiction, romantic comedy, horror films, and cinema noir. "Understanding Movies" may also explore the relationship between the cinema and modernity by scrutinizing the intersections between the film and such issues as urbanization and changes in class and gender. It may also examine texts dealing with art movements, such as Cubism, Constructivism, expressionism, Surrealism etc. The addition of these courses is a necessity. This addition makes the program better prepared to play an important role in the University's general education mission. It tries meeting the needs of the society by providing graduates with the skills necessary for development, offering quality subjects confirming Jordan's vision of disseminating education and peace, and integrating technology into study plans. The achievement of these objectives is at the center of the attention of all University presidents whose attempts at development certainly impact the whole country. As far as objectives are concerned, one of the objectives of the cultural studies program should be to analyze art and literature, science and technology, media and the practices that form ordinary life. Subjects such as art, literature, science, media,

and technology cannot be studied in isolation. They must be related to issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and power. It has been shown that this program emphasizes literature as a cultural expression, and that it devotes much space to culture, which is a great advantage. It is true that culture defines who we are, binds people together, impacts the way we think and relate to others etc. It is also true that students' studying other cultures make them better understand not only the people they share the world with, but also their own culture. Furthermore, this study of culture may be viewed as being responsible for the birth of cultural studies whose texts "comprise all the meaningful artifacts of culture", and are as scattered as the scholars and professors who teach the subjects sharing its umbrella. So far, unfortunately, there has been no association for cultural studies in Jordan. The value of this association lies in its helping scholars with exchanging views amongst themselves as well as with others outside of the country. This act of sharing views is helpful as it enables some scholars to gain the inspiration they lack from others. It also keeps those scholars connected even though they are miles away. The other value that can be attached to this association is that it gives scholars the chance to meditate upon their problems and settle them. As long as this association is absent, scholars are certain to go on with suffering and wrestling with their problems on their own, with each one of them singing a different song similar to a choir in disharmony. Despite the fact that these problems are frustrating, professors and scholars at the Hashemite University haven't been discouraged. The efforts and sacrifices made have been fruitful. Students are becoming better; enrollments are rising steadily; the program itself is establishing a firm footing in the University, which is becoming one of the top two or three universities in the country.

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