Religion and Tolerance in Moroccan Higher Education: The Promises and Challenges of Interfaith Dialogue Education

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Abstract

After 9/11, several scholars suggested the implementation of interfaith/interreligious dialogue education in the field of education to foster more tolerance and "acceptance" of the "religious Other" in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Very recently, interfaith dialogue has been implemented in the Master's program: "Communication in Contexts: Culture and Dialogue" (Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Moulay Ismail University of Meknes, Morocco). Therefore, this study's main aim is to explore this course's challenges and promises. Three qualitative research questions were used to explore the following issues: (i) the challenges faced by the students, (ii) the competencies they developed, and (ii) the effectiveness and good teaching practices of the course. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data and qualitative content analysis was used for data analysis. Results indicated that despite several challenges, students managed to develop different interfaith dialogue competencies. The results also showed a need for more pedagogical strategies and innovative methods to make the course more effective. The findings of this study can give more insights to teachers and researchers of interfaith dialogue in the future.

Keywords

Higher education, interfaith dialogue, religious education, tolerance

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Introduction

On February 25, 1994, hundreds of Muslims and Jews were praying at the Cave of Machpela in Hebron because it was both Ramadan and Purim. Muslims and Jews go to pray in that sacred cave because it is the place where Prophet Abraham/Ibrahim was buried. All of a sudden, one of the visitors took out a machine gun and started shooting sporadically at the Muslim worshippers. When the shooting stopped, 29 Muslims were dead and 125 were injured. The perpetrator of that horrendous act was Baruch Goldstein, an American citizen of Jewish origin. Later investigations showed that Goldstein held extremist religious views and had strong connections with Jewish Rabbis in Israel (Hughes, 2012, p. 1). At that time, that terroristic attack was seen by many as an individual act of violence, and not as an event marking the beginning of a new phenomenon that needed deep understanding and analysis.

Similarly, when the 9/11 attacks took place in New York in 2001, Muslims and non-Muslims alike thought the attacks were only an isolated act of "religious violence" perpetuated by a limited number of angry individuals directed towards the United States and its policies in the Middle East. However, subsequent events proved the opposite: "religiously motivated violence" was becoming a fact. Since 9/11, there has been an astonishing upsurge of "religious violence" in different places of the world including places such as France, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Tunisia, Morocco, Mali, and Bali. Today, there is enough evidence that this type of violence is still going on and will undoubtedly strike again if not adequately addressed (Gerges, 2011; Wawro, 2010).

In Europe, most of the atrocious attacks have been conducted by radicals who are European citizens or by those who came from Islamic countries. The Islamic background, or sometimes nationality/identity, of these attackers has pushed several Europeans from different sides – politicians, scholars, and academicians, to blame Islam, Islamic teachings, and Islamic education for the rise of terrorism in Western countries (Gerges, 2011; McLoughlin & Robinson, 2017).

In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, scholars and researchers have started exploring different religions, and more specifically Islam, in their endeavor to understand why religion is used to justify some horrendous acts (Gerges, 2005). These scholars can generally be divided into four groups. The first group, such as McLoughlin and Robinson (2017), think that Islam is behind the violence that has been hitting Europe and America in the twenty-first century. Scholars of the second group think that violence is inherent in Islam because it is not a religion of peace; they rather prefer to call Islam "a religion of War". A third category of scholars blames the West and its policies in the Middle East that resulted in the rise of radical and extremist groups such as AL-Qaeda and ISIS. For the fourth group of scholars, the blame lies on the educational system of several Arab and Islamic countries. More specifically, these scholars think that religious education in the Islamic World, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), is still largely traditional and does not prepare students and citizens for the requirements of modern life and globalization (Hefner & Zaman, 2007).

However, instead of blaming Islam as a religion and Islamic education in Arab/Islamic countries, some scholars have focused on the promises that education can bring to change negative

and false assumptions that people have about each other in Muslim and non-Muslim countries (Hussaini, 2013; Wainscott, 2017). They think that the focus should be on educating Jews, Christians, and Muslims about each other's religious traditions to reduce prejudice, misunderstanding, hatred, and intolerance (Miranda, 2010; Tan, 2010; Washington, 1995). A considerable number of these scholars stress the importance of learning interfaith dialogue, both inside and outside schools, for the adherents of different religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (De Sousa, 2010; Duraka, 2010; Kienstra, van Dijk-Groeneboer, & Boelens, 2019).

Unlike in the West, religious education in the MENA region has remained largely conservative and traditional. The religious field in these countries is often open to different actors who sometimes use different persuasion strategies to attract large segments of society to convince them that their perspectives and interpretations are the right ones (Hefner, 2007). Some of these religious actors sometimes endorse violence as the only means to effect social, political, and religious change.

The growing use of "religious violence" across the world and the continuous criticism directed at Islam and Muslims for terrorism have pushed different Arab and Muslim countries to reconsider their religious education and its contents. Nevertheless, up to now, there has been no, or little, consideration in the Arab countries of the roles that interfaith dialogue can play to counter the discourse of "extremists", and the promises it can bring to the development of more understanding and tolerance of the "religious Other" (Cornille, 2010; Miranda, 2010).

Thus, the major purpose of this study is to fill this gap in both theory and research on teaching and learning interfaith dialogue in the MENA region. Also, to explore the challenges and promises of teaching interfaith dialogue in this region, three main purposes were used. The first purpose is to explore the challenges of learning interfaith dialogue in Morocco. The second purpose is to identify the competencies developed by students. The last purpose is to examine the effectiveness of the course in the Moroccan context.

To achieve the purposes of the study, three research questions were developed:

RQ 1: What are the main challenges Moroccan university students face in learning interfaith dialogue?

RQ 2: What competencies do students develop in learning interfaith dialogue class in Morocco?

RQ 3: What are students' perspectives on effective teaching of interfaith dialogue in Moroccan higher education?

Islam and Politics in Morocco

Since its inception in Morocco in the seventh century, Islam has played a fundamental role in shaping all aspects of life in Morocco. In the political sphere, Islam has always been a central factor in gaining political legitimacy to rule the country.

Historically, all the dynasties that ruled Morocco since the eighth century have drawn their legitimacy from Islam. If it were not for Islam, the first Muslim monarch (*Idriss I*) would have never had the opportunity to access the throne. After fleeing for his life from the Middle East, *Idriss I* found refuge in the *Awraba* tribe because he claimed descent from Prophet Muhammad's family. He later on gained more prominence and was raised to the state of a monarch. The reign of *Idriss I* marked the beginning of the first Islamic dynasty that ruled Morocco from 789 to 921. Following this tradition, all the subsequent dynasties, such as the *Almoravids*, *Almohads*, and *Marinids*, based their rule of Morocco on Islam as a source of religious legitimacy to power. This tradition is still going on with the *Alaouites* today, a dynasty that has ruled Morocco for more than three hundred years.

After the independence of Morocco in 1956, the relationship between Islam and politics became more intricate. To consolidate his rule of Morocco in the 1960s, King Hassan II managed to become both the political and spiritual leader (*Amir Almouminine* or Commander of the Faithful) of the country. Since then, Moroccan officials, have had to go to the royal palace to renew the "annual rite" of "*albeia*" (act of allegiance) during the Feast of Throne. Howe (2005) explains that

> This annual rite is a renewal of the *beia*, the act of allegiance on which Moroccan sovereigns base their legitimacy, on a ceremony that has changed little in the past 300 years. The Moroccan king, who claims direct descent from the Muslim Prophet Mohammed, bears the distinguished title of *Amir al Mouminine*, or Commander of the Faithful, is both a spiritual and temporal ruler of this ancient North African kingdom. (p. 3)

Religious Policy and Religious Education in Morocco

Several scholars make a strong link between religious education and radicalism in the Muslim world. Often, scholars in the field overtly accuse the "madrassa" in countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia (Hefner, 2007). Most of these scholars frequently cite a famous quote from the New York Times Magazine about the link between the madrassa and Taliban in Pakistan: "There are 10,000 or madrassas, and militant Islam is at the core of most of them" (Hefner, 2007; Wainscott, 2017).

Also, the rise of postmodernism and its effects on all aspects of life has led scholars in religious and interreligious education to focus more on understanding the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of interreligious education (Durka, 2013). For Hefner (2007), the

traditional education that Muslim students receive in schools like the madrassas prepares students to become future jihadis more than anything else. “For many analysts, these and many other examples lent credence to the charge that madrassas are ‘Jihad factories’ and outposts of a backward-looking medievalism” (Hefner, 2007, p. 2).

The Issue of Tolerance

To many people, tolerance seems to be a self-explanatory term. People generally take it for granted that we all need to be tolerant toward each other. However, studies on the concept of tolerance have shown that there is much “confusion” and disagreement about its meaning. Afdal (2010) explains that this confusion is due to the complexity of the concept of tolerance and its effects:

> Confusion arises because tolerance is a tricky, elusive concept. Digging into the meaning of tolerance is like going into a maze. Around the corner are three new alleys you never knew about, and it is impossible to see where they lead. You lose direction in the pursuit of a genuine sense of tolerance. This leads to confusion and disagreement. We may very well agree on the importance and value of tolerance, but when we try to explicate and operationalize it, we disagree on meaning and consequences. (p. 597)

Accordingly, agreement on the meaning of tolerance is just a superficial one. The importance of tolerance can by no means hide the controversy that erupts once scholars try to explain and “operationalize” it.

To reduce the confusion around tolerance and its effects several scholars have recently started examining the different facets of tolerance and its meaning. Mendes-Flohr, for instance, explained that tolerance is a fuzzy term with a paradoxical nature: “Philosophically, tolerance is an elusive concept, fraught with logical paradoxes if not downright antinomies. Are we to tolerate the intolerable?” (2013, p. 6). He also added that tolerance had a “pejorative connotation, namely, a permissive or complacent attitude towards evil” (p. 6) before the eighteenth century in the French language. However, he thought that dialogic tolerance is different because it entails “understanding”, “mutual acceptance”, and “reciprocal understanding” of the “Other”:

> Dialogical tolerance derives its energy from a compelling desire to know and honor the Other, and perhaps at a deeper level a conviction that the Other, despite his or her difference – and perhaps even because of this difference (and this will be our point) – shares some basic humanity with oneself (Mendes-Flohr, 2013, p. 7).

Afdal (2010), on the other hand, developed three different typologies of tolerance: (i) “tolerance as endurance”, (ii) “tolerance as being prejudiced”, and (iii) “tolerance as openness”. The characteristics of each type are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Typologies of tolerance (Adopted from Afdal, 2010, p. 613)

Tolerance 1 Endurance	Tolerance 2 Being unprejudiced	Tolerance 3 Openness
Objection and acceptance Last resort Unity vs. difference Negative Procedural	Acceptance Virtue Difference within unity Positive Substantial	Difference and acceptance Empathy and learning Difference vs. difference Positive Relational

The Promises and Challenges of Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith/inter-religious dialogue has been defined in different ways by different scholars. Some scholars have focused on defining interfaith dialogue by highlighting its virtues and success. Other scholars have explored interfaith dialogue from different religious perspectives and between different religions. A third category of scholars dealt with the role of interfaith dialogue in relation to other areas such as peace-building and social action.

Dessel, Rogge, and Garlington, (2006) explain that dialogue is a "public process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues such as politics, racism, religion, and culture that are often flashpoints for polarization and social conflict" (p. 303).

For Armstrong (2003), interfaith dialogue allows us "to experience ex-stasis, an ecstasy that is not an exotic state of consciousness, but a true 'going beyond the self' which dethrones ourselves and our opinions from the center of the universe and puts the other there instead" (p. 206). Cornille (2013) gives a more detailed definition by explaining that

> In the encounter between members from different religious traditions, the term "dialogue" tends to be used in many ways, ranging from peaceful coexistence and friendly exchanges to active engagement with the teachings and practices of the other, and from cooperation toward social change to common prayer and participation in the ritual life of the other. (p. 20)

According to Knitter (2013), inter-religious dialogue can be divided into different types. She thinks that there are four types of inter-religious dialogue: (1) the dialogue of theology, (2) the dialogue of spirituality, (3) the dialogue of action, and (4) the dialogue of life.

However, for interfaith/inter-religious dialogue to succeed, various scholars think that certain conditions should be met. Without understanding and respecting these conditions, interfaith dialogue would be doomed to fail. Knitter (2013), for instance, upholds that interreligious dialogue has its musts that can be summarized into four basic conditions:

> To be engaged in what is called a dialogue among religious believers, one must: a) speak one's own convictions clearly and respectfully; b) listen to the convictions of others openly and generously; c) be open to learning something new and changing one's mind; and, if that happens, d) be prepared to change one's way of acting accordingly

People engaged in interfaith dialogue should also know that interfaith dialogue conditions differ from scholar to scholar. Although these conditions vary, they generally share several common points. These common points are displayed in the following comparison between the conditions advanced by Cornille (2013) and those of Kadayifci-Orellana (2013) in the following table:

Table 2: Conditions for effective inter-religious dialogue

Cornille (2013)	Kadayifci-Orellana (2013)
• Humility • Commitment • Interconnection • Empathy • Hospitality	• Identity of the parties and nature of the dispute • A clear purpose • Selection of parties • Balance of power • Creating a safe and secure environment • Examination of similarities and differences • Collaborative task • Intra-faith meetings • Follow-up

Aspects of Interfaith Dialogue Education in the Twenty-first Century

Literature on interfaith/interreligious dialogue education of the twenty-first century can be divided into two main concerns: philosophical and theoretical aspects (Carmody, 2010; Elias, 2010; Hacinebioglu, 2010; Moran, 2013), and pedagogical aspects (Engebretson, De Souza, Durka, & Gearon, 2010; Goldburg, 2010; Kienstra, van Dijk-Groeneboer, & Boelens, 2019; Nakagawa, 2010; Wade, 2010).

As far as the pedagogical aspects of interreligious dialogue are concerned, they can be generally divided into three areas. The first category is composed of studies that focus on the discussion of theory related to religious and interreligious dialogue education (e.g., Hedges, 2010; Wade, 2010). The second category is made up of studies that deal with how theory is put into practice in developing programs in different countries (e.g., Gross, 2010; Tan, 2010). The last

category (e.g., De Souza, 2010; Nanji, 2010) incorporates studies that "examine current multi-faith approaches and programs and situate them within a theoretical base which informed their planning, process, practice and evaluation" (De Souza, 2010, pp. 282-283).

Broadly speaking, reviewing the literature on the pedagogies of interfaith dialogue in the twenty-first century shows that it has three main characteristics. First, there is a dearth of empirical studies on the field. Second, the majority of the studies that have been done so far focus on the theoretical sides by exploring the knowledge and the competencies that interfaith dialogue partners should be equipped with. Third, most, if not all, the studies that have been conducted in the field have been done in Western countries like the United States and Canada. The prevalence of research in the field of religion in the West is due to the attacks of 9/11 and its aftermath. De Souza (2010) explains this link between the beginning of the war on terrorism after 9/11 and research in inter-religious education in the following:

> When this became centered on the Middle East leading to the subsequent war on terrorism, relations between different Christian and Muslim groups across many parts of the world erupted quickly into overt signs of intolerance, hostility, and violence, helped along by reactive media coverage and some political attitudes and commentaries. This deteriorating situation has challenged proactive members in pluralist communities to find ways to increase knowledge and understanding of different religious traditions and cultures as a means to promote social cohesion. Such interest and related activity is evident in the funding of research projects and conferences, particularly in Europe, that are examining interreligious education. (p. 282)

As a matter of fact, despite the existence of a considerable number of studies on interfaith/inter-religious dialogue education studies, it seems there is a paucity of studies on interfaith dialogue education in the Middle East and North Africa region. As a result, there is a dearth of information on teachers' and students' perspectives on interfaith/inter-religious dialogue and what teaching pedagogies are used in teaching it in the MENA region.

Methods

The research design used in this study is based on a qualitative approach. The choice of this approach has been determined by the nature of the topic (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Creswell, 2003; Paton, 2002). More specifically, this study relies on qualitative content analysis as a method of analyzing the three religious texts. Qualitative content analysis has been widely used by different scholars to analyze the content of texts, such as interviews, in a scientific way (Creswell, 2012; Darlington & Scott, 2002; Gillham, 2005). According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2011), "Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior indirectly, through an analysis of their communications. It is just what its name implies: the analysis of the usually, but not necessarily, written contents of a communication" (p. 478). As such, qualitative content analysis can help in exploring the perspectives and attitudes of the respondents toward learning interfaith dialogue in Morocco

Sampling and Sampling Procedure

The sample of this study is composed of 13 Master's students from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Moulay Ismail University of Meknes, Morocco. There are 10 females and 3 males in the sample, aged between 21 and 27. The sampling strategy adopted in this study is "convenience sampling". The choice of this strategy was due to the lack of this course in any other Master's program in Morocco universities. The respondents in this sample are from different regions of Moroccan as Table 3 below shows:

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Case Summaries			
Respondent	Age	Gender	Hometown
1	21	M	Agadir
2	22	M	Fez
3	22	F	Fez
4	25	F	Imouzzer
5	22	F	Meknes
6	27	F	Meknes
7	21	F	Rabat
8	22	M	Rabat
9	26	F	Meknes
10	25	F	Meknes
11	23	F	Khemisset
12	23	F	Rabat
13	23	F	Oujda
Total N	13	13	13

Data Collection and Data Analysis

To collect data from the respondents, I semi-structured interview was used. The interview was divided into three parts. The first part used general questions about the students including gender, age, and place of living. In the second part, the questions targeted information related to the three research questions. Some of the questions used in this part were: What are some of the challenges you faced with this course? Why? Which activities did you like best? Why? What competencies did this course help you develop? And which activities didn't you like? Why/Why not? The interview also included a follow-up section that was to collect more information about issues that remained unclear during the interview and needed more clarification.

For data analysis, qualitative content analysis techniques were used. After the interview, data were transcribed for coding since coding is considered an integral part of analysis in

qualitative research (Darling & Scott, 2002). The development of the codes was used as a first step to help develop categories and themes. After that, the categories and themes were classified for further analysis to answer the research questions of the study.

Results

Since this study had three main objectives, three qualitative research questions were developed. The findings of these research questions are, therefore, presented in connection to each question.

The Challenges of Teaching/Learning Interfaith Dialogue in Moroccan Higher Education

The purpose of research question 1 was to explore Moroccan students' perceptions of the main challenges that they faced in the interfaith dialogue class in the Moroccan context. Although all the respondents in this study have a positive attitude towards the course and admit that the course was important and had many benefits, they all thought that they faced different challenges in dealing with interfaith dialogue. Some of the main themes that the students raised during the interview showed that these challenges could be divided into two main levels: (1) at the level of learning, and (2) at the level of pedagogy.

At the level of learning, some of these challenges included the lack of knowledge, sensitivity, and narrow-mindedness of some students. For example, respondent 1 explained that "As far as students are concerned, sometimes some students find it difficult to accept others' opinions especially when discussing sensitive matters such as secularism versus *shari'a* law". Respondent 8, on the other hand, highlighted the sensitive aspect of red lines in religion: "One of the biggest challenges that this course could face is the fact that it deals with such a sensitive issue as religions, an issue that it considered by some people a red zone which should not be discussed".

At the level of pedagogy, the respondents thought that the challenges were due to several factors like the difficulty of the course, the vast topics incorporated in the course, the atmosphere in the classroom, the attitude of the teacher and his/her teaching strategies, and the negative attitudes of some classmates. The magnitude of the course, for instance, was well-explained by one of the respondents when she said: "I believe that some of the other challenges that may be presented during the execution of this course are related to the fact that the course covers widely diverse and vague topics" (respondent 7). When asked about the pedagogical challenges of the course, another respondent (interviewee 1) summarized the challenges in three main issues:

> The first one [challenge] is the atmosphere which does not allow for a two-way communication process. The second one is some sort of narrow-mindedness which does not allow difference in class. The third one is the course by nature belongs to the realm of "Comparative Religions". Fourth, the simplistic way by which the course is taught in class diminishes its efficacy. The course also calls for a wide scope of knowledge; not mere copy and paste.

Ultimately, some respondents expressed bitter feelings about the attitudes of some of their classmates. One of the respondents felt very bad about what he called bias or preconceived ideas of some classmates when he said: "I am not a fundamentalist as some students wrongly assume. I like to give my opinion about how I see things, but some students could not understand that".

Interfaith Dialogue Competencies

The objective of research question 2 was to identify and understand the different competencies that Moroccan students develop in the interfaith dialogue class. In this study, nearly all the respondents (12 out of 13) had positive attitudes towards the course. They also recognized the importance of the newly acquired competencies they had developed thanks to the interfaith dialogue course. Some of these competencies are, indeed, core requirements of interfaith dialogue in the twenty-first century (open-mindedness, tolerance, acceptance of the other, etc.). Respondent 3, for instance, highlighted the development of some interfaith dialogue competencies and their benefits in the following quote:

> I learned to be more open-minded concerning other religions, rituals, and beliefs. The course enabled us to have better conversations with people from other religions. The course also helps one to develop a sense of wisdom with regard to how he/she perceives truth. It made me develop a high sense of humility with regard to the knowledge I have, and a sense of empathy, openness, and understanding with regard to the other's perceptions of truths.

Undoubtedly, the three competencies referred to in the above quote – open-mindedness, humility, and empathy – are of paramount importance in interfaith dialogue contexts. Different scholars have stressed the centrality of these competencies as personality traits that enhance effective interfaith dialogue (e.g., Cornille, 2013; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2013).

Other respondents, on the other hand, gave priority to some critical thinking skills and abilities that they developed thanks to the course. Different respondents said that they became better at analysis, interpretation, and dialogue. For respondent 12, for instance,

> In my opinion, this course helps develop many competencies within the students. Among these (…) the critical thinking ability, for the course introduces challenging concepts and ideas that push one to leave one's ideological comfort zone and branch out to unfamiliar fields of thought by widening one's capabilities for critical thought. Second, I believe that the course develops the student's ability for rational discussion and conversation.

Strategies Used in Teaching Interfaith Dialogue

The responses of the students in this study provide interesting data about the types of strategies Moroccan teachers of interfaith dialogue use and students' perceptions of these strategies. As far as teaching strategies are concerned, the results showed that the teacher of interfaith dialogue in this study generally favored four teaching strategies, namely lecturing, textbook reading, reading research articles, and article critiquing. These results also revealed that lectures and articles and or book chapter reading were the two most widely used strategies in the

Moroccan context. On the other hand, it seems that teaching with projects, role plays, portfolios, and ICT use has no place in the interfaith dialogue class in Morocco as Table 4 shows:

Table 4: Teaching strategies used

Strategy used:	Yes	No
Lecture	✓	
Textbook reading	✓	
Read research article	✓	
Article critique	✓	
Case studies	✓	
Oral presentations by students		✓
Individual/group projects		✓
Roleplay		✓
Portfolio		✓
ICT use		✓

When asked about teaching strategies and students' preferences, the respondents came up with important answers. Table 5 presents the results of students' preferences for teaching strategies:

Table 5: Students' preferences for teaching strategies

Strategy preferred:	Yes	No
Lecture	10	3
Debate	12	1
Articles and book chapters	12	1
Guests from other faiths	13	0
Inferential Questions	12	1
Projects	12	1
External trips	13	0

As can be seen in Table 5 above, most Moroccan students seem to have a clear preference for teaching strategies such as debates, projects, articles, and book chapters, guests from other faiths, and external trips. In addition to that, it seems that a substantial number of the respondents (10 respondents) prefer lecturing as a teaching strategy. Interestingly, too, all the respondents said that they preferred to have people from other religious affiliations as guests in the classroom (13 respondents).

Discussion

The above findings clearly show that although teaching interfaith dialogue has several promises, the road to effective teaching is still long in the Moroccan context. The findings are also

compatible with the literature on teaching/learning interfaith dialogue. There is ample evidence that even in countries with a long history of interfaith education, teaching this course is still constrained by numerous challenges at the levels of both theory and practice (Engebretson, De Souza, Durka, & Gearon, 2010).

First of all, unlike in other countries, teaching interfaith dialogue education in Morocco faces several challenges that are sometimes context-specific. As noted above, these challenges vary and differ due to the nature of interfaith dialogue as a discipline. For instance, lack of training and teachers' background knowledge in the field can sometimes be a serious handicap to teachers with limited experience in such courses. Also, since the course is new and has never been taught at Moroccan universities, there is a total absence of any curriculum or teaching pedagogies for teachers. Teaching is often based on personal efforts as teachers have to develop their own curriculum and decide on how to implement it. Teachers' choices have sometimes some negative repercussions on students. The adopted reading materials may present several extra challenges to the students if not carefully chosen as the findings of this have shown. In other cases, students' personality traits, cultural background, and religious upbringing add to the difficulties of the learning process and hinder the success of the course. As is the case in most countries, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, for example, are not easy to do away with in the classroom especially when students are faced with other worldviews and beliefs that are considered alien or a threat to their religion (Islam in this case) in their cultural context.

Second, the findings show that despite the various challenges students faced while learning interfaith dialogue, they managed to develop some important inter-religious competencies. The development of these inter-religious competencies helped these students gain a more positive attitude towards the course and other religious traditions. As discussed in the literature review, these competencies are, indeed, among the main gains of learning interfaith dialogue (Cornille, 2013). In the interviews, students admitted they had developed several positive competencies, such as humility, empathy, tolerance, and open-mindedness thanks to the course the interfaith dialogue class. Some of these competencies are also among the primary "preconditions" of interfaith dialogue that some scholars, such as Cornille (2013) and Kadayifci-Orellana (2013), required for "effective interfaith dialogue" and "peacebuilding" across the world in the twenty-first century.

Third, based on the findings, interfaith dialogue education in Morocco can be more effective if new teaching strategies are adopted. In other words, traditional approaches should give way to student-centered approaches to teaching interfaith dialogue in the Moroccan context. Student-centered approaches can give better results because they are based on more effective activities such as problem-solving, conducting projects, giving presentations, etc. These activities have proved their effectiveness in other countries as they have the potential to make students more active and more motivated (Stewart, 2021).

Further, because Morocco is a monocultural society with Islam as a dominant religion, the classroom often lacks the religious and cultural diversity that is usually found in other countries

like the United States, England, and Canada. In the Moroccan context, the students often find themselves discussing with like-minded peers and face fewer challenges at the levels of religious beliefs, values, and worldview. Teachers, therefore, need to invite guests from other religious affiliations (as some respondents suggested) because such situations can prepare students for authentic dialogue encounters in the future. For instance, having Christian, Jewish, or Baha'i guests in the interfaith dialogue class can tremendously help in reducing a lot of misunderstandings, stereotypes, and prejudices about the adherents of these religious traditions in Morocco.

Ultimately, effectiveness in teaching interfaith dialogue in Moroccan higher education cannot be achieved overnight. It should also be the concern of both practitioners and policymakers in Morocco. In this study, some respondents complained about the problems caused by the mismatch between theory and practice in the classroom. This theory-practice gap needs to be addressed by teachers to make the course more successful and meaningful in the Moroccan context. Using "articles and book chapters" alone is not enough to give students a deeper understanding of interfaith dialogue and its promises in the twenty-first century. Policymakers should also consider and encourage professional training to provide teachers with adequate training to become more proficient in dealing with the complexities and challenges of teaching interfaith dialogue to Moroccan students.

Conclusion

This study is an exploration of the challenges faced by Moroccan university students in learning interfaith dialogue, the competencies they develop, and their perspectives on how to make interfaith dialogue education more effective in Moroccan higher education. It is also about the challenges Moroccan teachers face in teaching interfaith in the Moroccan context. These results reveal that lectures and articles/book chapters are the two most widely used strategies in the Moroccan context. The overuse of these strategies is among the major challenges students face in learning interfaith dialogue. Despite these challenges, Moroccan students have been able to develop some very useful interfaith dialogue competencies, such as more tolerance, openness, and acceptance of the "religious Other". Still, the findings indicate that there is a heavy reliance on traditional pedagogies in Morocco though they are not often adequate or viable in teaching interfaith dialogue to students. The inclination today is more toward using innovative methods (student-centered approaches, individual/group projects, cooperative group tasks, using ICT, etc.) because they have the potential to make students more active, and more autonomous, and place them at the center of the learning process.

The present study's findings have multiple implications for teachers, learners, and policymakers. Teachers of interfaith dialogue should have some training to develop the required skills and competencies for teaching such classes. In teaching interfaith dialogue, teachers are required to adopt student-centered approaches as they have the potential to offer better teaching practices for Moroccan students today. Good teaching practices, such as problem-solving, real-life situations, scenarios, and case studies, are more effective since they do only provide students with

more insights about the "religious Other", but also equip students with a toolkit of competencies that can help them become more effective in interfaith dialogue situations.

Due to the nature of the approach used, this study has some limitations. The first limitation lies in the limited number of participants. However, it should be noted that the use of a small sample is due to the nature of the study, which is qualitative. The second limitation is connected to the context of the study: all the respondents in the sample belonged to the same class and had the same teachers. Indeed, it was impossible to have other respondents because the interfaith dialogue course was offered in only one Master's program ("*Communication in context: Culture and Dialogue*") in Moroccan higher education. Ultimately, the findings of this study cannot be generalized because the sample is in no way representative.

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