

Pedagogy and the Revolution

Maha Bali, Center for Learning & Teaching

“The revolution cannot be ignored at this time. It is a historic time that will change most people's perspectives.”
– English Language instructor in CLT survey

Educators from Dewey to Freire emphasize the importance of learning that revolves around students' own lived experiences. Affirming the pedagogical potential of incorporating Egypt's revolution into AUC courses, CLT conducted a survey to learn about how faculty planned to modify their teaching this semester. Based on feedback from the survey, CLT also held a faculty forum on Sunday March 6 entitled “Pedagogy and the Revolution” facilitated by Michael Reimer from History. This newsletter summarizes some of the key findings from the survey and the forum¹.

Integrating revolutionary themes is more straightforward in some disciplines than others. Those who teach Political Science, Economics, and Journalism and Mass Communication, have found direct ways of doing so, whether in terms of reflecting back on the revolution (e.g. analyzing media usage during the demonstrations, analyzing the “anatomy of the rebellion” in light of game theory in economics) or looking forwards, like studying the March 19th constitutional changes, predicting future economic reforms for Egypt, writing policy suggestions to political leaders, fundraising for the statue of the martyrs in Tahrir square, discussing possible post-Mubarak foreign policy issues, etc. Faculty from SAPE have decided to focus on analyzing the social problems Egypt needs to tackle after the revolution, or having students observe and reflect on how and why people are changing because of the revolution. In the Management department, a business ethics course will include student projects covering “the big corruption problems and how to regulate individual as well as institutional behavior going forward.” In Rhetoric and Composition, Ebony Coletu is focusing her course on looking at the life histories of figures who have inspired or instigated revolutions all over the world, including the ones in progress in Egypt and Libya. The History department's team-taught course “Isqat al Nizam” will relate the recent revolution to previous revolutions in Egyptian and world history.

Even faculty in the School of Sciences and Engineering have found ways of integrating the revolution into their courses. For example, the second Scientific Thinking general lecture was a panel discussion on how to use critical thinking to evaluate the reliability of information, given the new social media and the recent communication shutdown during the revolution. This panel included young activists and bloggers, as well as JRMC professor Kim Fox. Some instructors of Scientific Thinking asked students to look at conflicting reports on Mubarak's fortune, on events of the revolution, and to evaluate the reliability of the evidence presented. In an Architectural Engineering course, students will design an Egypt Expo building for their projects, during which they will reflect on the kind of image of Egypt they wish to present to the world. After a brainstorming meeting with CLT staff, a Mathematics professor found several applications for mathematics related to the revolution, such as having student do a rich sensitivity analysis on the consumables in Tahrir square or look at functions relating the corruption index to various criteria.

Some faculty felt there should be a shift in pedagogical outlook, not just in course content. For example, some faculty in the survey said they would involve AUC students more in course-related decision-making. A Management professor said he expected more critical analysis in class, and Carol Clark from ELI emphasized the increasing relevance of using debate to promote critical thinking. Michael Reimer, who facilitated the workshop, suggested that our role as teachers is to empower students to become active citizens, saying “we don't want to predict the future, we want our students to make it.” One Architectural Engineering instructor said in our survey,

¹ Forty-one faculty responded to the survey anonymously, and so all quotes from the survey are anonymous. Special thanks to Laura DeLancey from CLT for taking detailed notes from the Forum to support my own when writing this newsletter.

“I want them [students] to feel empowered and responsible for the perception of the world of their work and accomplishments”.²

Even without directly connecting one’s course to the revolution, several faculty in our survey felt a difference in student attitudes. One Economics instructor said: “Students were very keen and enthusiastic to help their country ... I shall do my best to take full advantage of this patriotism and enthusiasm.” Faculty from different disciplines also reported that students spontaneously made their own connections between course themes and the revolution.

One extracurricular activity proposed by Ahmed Tolba (Management) was inspired by the Model United Nations – his idea is to have students create “model” political parties for Egypt and debate their respective strategies. This would be an interdisciplinary (and hopefully inter-university) endeavor as students would have to explore the various aspects of Egypt’s development.

Parting Thoughts

An important cautionary note that was raised and discussed during the forum was that AUCians need to realize that their privileged background and education do not necessarily make them as well-informed as they should be, nor will it later give them the right or privilege to make decisions on behalf of the Egyptian population. I therefore suggested that activities where students are asked to recommend policies or reforms should be grounded in community-based research that involves Egyptians from all walks of life rather than students’ own personal academic analyses.

Faculty in both the forum and the survey recognized that not all AUC students will necessarily be pro-revolution. Whilst I believe we cannot and should not be neutral on issues of social justice, some faculty reminded us of the importance of reflecting on ways of tackling revolution themes without ostracizing those who are (or whose families are) against the revolution or those who did not participate.

Ongoing Support for Pedagogy and the Revolution

CLT’s doors are open for faculty who wish to brainstorm ways of incorporating the revolution into their courses. Please email clt@aucegypt.edu or contact any CLT member directly for an appointment.

The library also offers customized sessions to help your students conduct research on revolution themes. Contact Amanda Click aclick@aucegypt.edu or your department liaison for details.

² Stay tuned for two workshops on encouraging active citizenship and student-centered pedagogy: Pandeli Glavanis’ workshop entitled “Educating Citizens: Preparing AUC Undergraduates for the New Egypt”, and a more general workshop “The Art of Discussion Leading” facilitated by Aziza Ellozy and Maha Bali.