Critical Citizenship in Practice

Maha Bali, Senior Manager, Pedagogy & Assessment
Center for Learning and Teaching

> ...creating a humanistic culture that values the desire to learn from the unexpected and uncomfortable sources as much as it values the critical faculties would be an important contribution to our academic and civic life. (Roth, 2010)

I start the Fall 2013 semester with much excitement and trepidation. In response to this summer's events, I reflected on the role of higher education in the midst of the political upheaval Egyptians now face (Bali, 2013). I proposed a new understanding of critical citizenship that goes beyond developing critical thinking, towards promoting a culture of social justice and empathy in our students. The first comment on the article by Amina ElBendary (AUC History department faculty) shared concerns about teaching in these difficult times when there is so much division, and how to create a safe environment for discussing these issues. I share the same concerns about how to use the classroom in ways that are productive and promote learning while at the same time keeping the classroom a safe environment rather than replicating the political conflicts outside. As Pandeli Glavanis pointed out in an email, there is a "need to maintain academic freedom while ensuring civil debate on campus among students, staff and faculty". In a recent workshop I gave, faculty shared similar concerns. There are those from disciplines that cannot ignore this topic (e.g. journalism, political science), and there are those from disciplines that have a choice to include such topics (e.g. most social sciences and humanities). But even disciplines that would seemingly be unaffected (e.g. sciences and engineering) cannot ignore the possible underlying tensions that students would bring with them to the classroom (let alone our own tensions as faculty).

Edward Said, political activist though he was, felt strongly about separating his politics from his teaching. However, this does not mean completely ignoring the political context we live in, because good pedagogy "requires sensitivity to context, history, and cultural and economic circumstances" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 157). We are not unaffected, and neither are our students.

While the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT) has been able to provide support for faculty in terms of ways of incorporating technology to deal with potential interruptions to classes, we have less experience on teaching during such political divisions. I thought 9/11 must have been a similarly pedagogically difficult situation. I found some useful tips from Vanderbilt University's website on teaching in times of crisis (Chick & CFT staff, 2001/2013) shared by my colleague Gihan Osman. They suggest that it is usually better *to do something*, to acknowledge what has been happening, than to ignore it. Among the ideas they suggest are:

- Taking a moment of silence
- Minding the cognitive load (by this they mean for faculty to be empathetic and accommodating to how tensions and anxieties outside the classroom affect students' capacity to learn effectively)
- Assigning relevant activities or materials
- Facilitating a discussion, possibly involving the university's counseling center

The website has useful tips on managing difficult conversations and also has links on creating safe spaces for communication and managing hot topics.

After the January 25, 2011 revolution, many faculty were eager to incorporate the revolution in their courses (Bali, 2011). Bringing in the outside political environment into our classes this time around can be a big risk. It is also a tremendous learning opportunity, and one can argue that the political situation will come into our classrooms whether we invite it or not. Having no expertise in handling such situations myself, I sought ideas from the American University of Beirut (AUB), who have much more experience dealing with political upheaval. Though my contact there had no specific tips to give me, she pointed me to the importance of community outreach, and how, though AUB's Neighborhood Initiative, they learned to appreciate "the value of creating a process that leaves time (and gives intellectual space) for vagueness, for undirected learning" (Myntti, 2013). There is no doubt that experiential learning that involves community outreach via extracurricular activities or community-based learning have a role to play in developing responsible citizens (Glavanis, 2011; El-Taraboulsi; 2011, Bali, 2013). Do you have any specific thoughts or ideas that you would like to share with the rest of the AUC community? Have you found useful resources to support you this semester? If you are willing to share those ideas/resources with the rest of the community, we are starting a wiki collecting those ideas to be shared with the AUC community at https://sites.google.com/a/aucegypt.edu/criticalcitizenship/. Please send your contribution to bali@aucegypt.edu or clt@aucegypt.edu. [We are also available for one-on-one consultations, even though we have limited experience]

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