

Educating Citizens: An AUC Priority?

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Two of my colleagues at CLT (Maha Bali and Hoda Mostafa) have recently published essays that focus on, among other things, what and how we teach at AUC. As an engaged academic and primarily a “teacher” I welcome both contributions and ask them to indulge me the opportunity to engage in the discussion they have generated. First let me note that I greatly appreciate it when colleagues are motivated to be more thoughtful and critical of what and how we teach, and especially when they concern themselves with the fundamental question for all “teachers”, namely, “what we seek to achieve through our teaching and scholarship” (Nelson, 2012: 1). Nelson then goes on to set the parameters within which we can start to answer such a question. She notes that “an analysis of the possible impact that education can have moves beyond the standard questioning of pedagogy, and speaks to the societal value of education as transformative, not just for the student and future graduate but also for society”. (Nelson, 2012: 1) Such questions especially set in such parameters go beyond bread and butter discussions related to innovative pedagogy, teaching strategy or the role of instructional technology in teaching and learning. They address much wider concerns and visions, which operate at the level of the institution as a whole. Concerns already mentioned by Maha Bali in her essay and eloquently addressed recently by a pioneering article by Michelle Deardorff and Angela Mae Kupenda, entitled *Negotiating Social Mobilization and Critical Citizenship: Institutions at a Crossroad* (2011).

Deardorff and Kupenda push the debate well beyond the confines of technical issues such as how we teach and behave in the classroom in a moment of crisis or how to make up for class disruption by using “blended learning”. Important and vital as these issues are for the sustainability of the academic program they fail to address the key question posed by the two authors for institutions that continuously face and have to deal with societal crises and transformation. The inspiration for the two authors to locate their discussion “outside the box” of conventional teaching and learning debates originates well before they wrote their article. As I already noted in a previous essay, entitled *Educating Citizens: Preparing AUC Students for the new Egypt* (2011) the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, raised the alarm bells very early in the new millennium (2002) when they highlighted their grave concerns over the moral and civic character of Americans in the 21st century which they saw as being central to democracy’s future. Their engagement with this issue and extensive research concluded that institutions of higher education have a major and primary role to play in addressing these concerns. Several years later and given that academia did not respond in a constructive way the US Department of Education commissioned in 2010 the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) to produce a report on the state of civic learning and democratic engagement in the country and prepare a road map for the future. In a meeting of the AACU in early January 2012 they released the report, entitled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*. (AACU, 2012). The report “makes the case for an elevated level of civic knowledge and democratic engagement among college students”. (Basu, 2012: 1). The significance attributed to this issue in the USA can be glimpsed by the fact that “the U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and U.S. Under Secretary of Education Martha Kanter will join other Obama administration officials and higher education luminaries at the White House today [January 10, 2012] to make the case that an engaged citizenry will bolster the country’s democracy and economy” (Basu, 2012:1).

It is within such a background and context that the Deardorff and Kupenda wrote their seminal article. In it

the authors juxtapose two seemingly inconsistent struggles faced by institutions of higher education – improving the socioeconomic possibilities of our students versus preparing students for what they theorize as “Critical Citizenship.”: “Preparing students to prosper in the present structure, while it may help them to individually succeed, is in a way teaching them to become participants in structures of continued oppression of others. (Deardorff and Kupenda, 2011:339)

The message for us at AUC is crystal clear. As I have already argued in my previous 2011 essay, and seconded by Maha Bali in her essay, experiential learning in the form of Community-Based Learning as a teaching method is a key component contributing to the development of responsible citizens at AUC and thus contributing to the current severe crises facing Egypt. There is an urgency to do so as the country needs institutions such as AUC which educates the elite to play a leading role. In some respects Egypt needs such a contribution from its Universities even more so than the USA. To do so, of course, will require a considerable effort at ALL levels of the institution for it to be accomplished. CLT can facilitate and help and support faculty to do so, but the decision to implement or even pilot courses with a CBL component has to be taken at other levels of the academy: departments, schools, senate, provost and president’s office. Not to take such concerns on board is not just to fail our students, but also the society that hosts us. Egypt is in dire need for critical citizens and we have the resources and academic qualifications to provide them. In my next essay I will present my own ideas on how we can initiate such a discussion across the institution and in the mean time welcome suggestions and comments.

SOURCES

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