Chapter 5

Fostering Learner Agency in a Digital Literacies Course in Egypt: Reflections on Several Iterations

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Nurturing learner agency can foster critical citizenship for young adults in a relatively safe environment. The American University in Cairo (AUC) has a mostly Egyptian student body, coming from diverse educational backgrounds: some have experienced schooling which centers around memorization and teacher authority, thus stifling agency and critical thinking. In addition, we are surrounded by a culture and political environment that does the same: an authoritarian government that makes questioning authority and free speech in general risky. This chapter reflects on attempts to create space for learner agency over three years of teaching the course, Digital Identities and Digital Literacies in an Intercultural Context. Four co-authors reflect on these three approaches:

1. *Ungrading via learner self-grading*
2. *Learner-contributed content and activities*
3. *Choose-your-own-pathway for developing digital literacies*

This paper will describe how this approach evolved over time and how learner reactions were observed and listened to. Some of the challenges and how the underlying critical pedagogy values were used to guide the teacher in addressing them are also presented. Included is how the teacher's own agency as the sole designer and teacher of this course (which is independent of other courses at the university) helped provide flexibility. In addition, the co-authors (students) will reflect on their learning experience (quotes are in italics).

Introduction

I (Maha Bali) teach an undergraduate course at the American University in Cairo (AUC), Egypt. This chapter is co-authored with four of my students who took my course *Digital Identities and Digital Literacies in an Intercultural Context* in Fall 2019. I use first-person throughout, and my co-authors' contributions are quoted separately and named by their first names: Khaled, Mai, Toqa, and Youssef.

Students who take my class are mostly Egyptian, but come from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, some of which have stifled agency and critical thinking by emphasizing memorization and teacher authority in classes that lack dialogue and active learning. In Cairo, we are surrounded by a culture and political environment that does not readily encourage criticality and dissent - political free speech against authoritarian governments is risky.

Khaled reflects on learning before my course:

'Most of my learning experiences so far largely lacked learner agency, mainly due to the fact that teachers and professors come into class having already prepared their syllabI and what they wish to teach about their subject or course.' (Khaled)

Toqa wrote*, 'In school I usually had this fixed curriculum where the goal was to learn every chapter of the book (so far away from the learner agency concept)'.*

Over three years of teaching the course, I have tried creating space for learner agency in various ways. In this chapter, I will reflect on:

1. Ungrading via learner self-grading
2. Learner-contributed content and activities
3. Choose-your-own-pathway for developing digital literacies

I will describe how I applied each of these instructional approaches and how my approach evolved over time as I observed and listened to learner reactions. I will discuss some of the challenges and how my underlying values guided me in addressing them. I had a lot of flexibility as the designer and sole teacher of this course. This course was not a prerequisite for any other, but was one option among several 'core curriculum global studies' requirement courses within a liberal arts institution - therefore there was no pressure to fulfill particular content requirements needed in future courses or accreditation requirements for a degree, as long as the course fulfilled some skills-based learning outcomes related to reading, writing, critical thinking, oral communication and global/intercultural learning. When I speak of learner agency here, I mean, 'that each person is a dignified and responsible human being who shapes her or his own life in the light of goals that matter, rather than simply being shaped or instructed how to think' (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 5). This understanding seems to fit with the liberal arts philosophy of AUC, although it should be noted that AUC students have mentioned

that most STEM courses do not promote learner agency, while some courses at AUC do.

I will briefly discuss the underpinning theory behind each approach I used in my course, but one of my important guiding principles here is human capability theory. As Walker and Unterhalter (2007) state, "We must evaluate freedoms for people to be able to make decisions they value and work to remove obstacles to those freedoms, that is, expand people's capabilities" (p. 5). One's environment and upbringing can limit one's capacity to choose, even when given choices such that, 'Unequal social and political circumstances (both in matters of redistribution and recognition) lead to unequal chances and unequal capacities to choose' (Nussbaum, 2000 in Walker and Unterhalter, 2007, p. 6). As such, when given choices, disadvantaged groups may end up with diminished agency as they recreate the hierarchies and oppressions they have internalized as to what is possible for them rather than what is in their best interests (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). It is, therefore, essential to recognize that while schools have the potential to empower learners, they have historically also been used to reproduce inequalities, and any work toward nurturing learner agency for young people will be working to undo that history, which touches different learners unequally. While AUC is a private institution and many of its learners are economically privileged, schooling has suppressed their power to think critically, express themselves and make their own pathways in life.

In what follows, I include some quotes from my co-authors which they contributed via a student survey and/or from public student blogs. The survey was inspired by the understanding of learner agency in the *Practitioner's Lexicon: What is meant by key terminology* (Education Reimagined, 2016). This describes learner agency in concrete terms as: a sense of learner ownership over one's own learning; an ability to articulate their learning needs and desires; learners developing adaptability, flexibility and resilience as they deal with increased responsibility for their learning; growing self-assuredness and self-

confidence; a sense of self-worth and believing their ideas are valuable; and that learners feel supported to take ownership of their learning in preparation for becoming lifelong learners.

While originally intending to run the survey with a larger number of students (all past students – ca. 100) and receiving institutional ethics approval to do so, I ended up only following up to have four responses to this narrative survey from students in the Fall 2019 semester who volunteered to co-author this chapter. These four students are not a random sample. They spoke and blogged critically throughout the course and gave me insights on how I might do things differently, and responded to my call for co-authors. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to fully co-author every step of the way, but they have all read and given feedback on the chapter and agreed to keep their names as co-authors. I felt that their voices were central to the chapter and deserved co-author status.

Ungrading via learner self-grading

Ungrading is a practice that recognizes that assigning a single letter or number to communicate student learning is problematic, and that, rather, 'Assessment must be a conversation' (Sackstein, 2015, Kindle loc 5). Ungrading can be done in a variety of ways (see Blum & Kohn, 2020), but all question the value of grading practices and attempt to undo some of its potential harms to learning and wellbeing.

I work at an institution that requires student grades (A-F), to have a relatively normal distribution (average B or B+) and to have a clear grade breakdown and cut-off point for each grade in the syllabus. However, this goes against my teaching philosophy. Instead, I believe strongly in what Palestinian mathematics educator Munir Fasheh (2000) has said, 'Giving a number or a letter to measure a human being is dishonest and inhuman; it is degrading to the human mind and to human beings. Grading, in this sense, is degrading. It is one of the biggest abuses of mathematics in its history!' (para.7)

Grades diminish learners' intrinsic' motivation (Kohn, 2011), introduce a culture of expecting external evaluation of one's work and create a sense of competition amongst peers. Instead, I want to encourage learners to critically look at their own work and to self-assess their effort and output. As Stommel (2017) writes, 'Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another' (para 2).

For this reason, I have experimented with different ungrading approaches over the years (and have written several blogposts on my process). Here is the approach I use:

1. **At the beginning of the semester**, I explain my approach to students. Most have never seen this before, so I explain that early in the semester I give numerical grades for work done, so they can keep track of what they are doing, and to give feedback; but towards the end of the semester, I mainly focus on giving feedback and asking them to self-assess their performance/learning.
2. **Mid-semester**, I take a whole class session where students self-assess their performance in the course so far, as follows:

    1. While entering class, students write on two whiteboards the answers to questions such as, 'how to do well in this course?' and, 'what is a good blogpost?' They can add something new, agree with others, and return to add to the board at any time.
    2. In groups of four or five, students do an activity of building things with magnet balls and rods, doing two different tasks, which demonstrate the difference between strict instructions and looser instructions that give room for creativity.
    3. Students choose to read one of two articles on grading

(Fasheh, 2000; Kohn 2011). They post to the course Slack (a channel-based messaging platform I use for informal communication with my students) a favorite quote from the article they read.

4. After about 30-40 minutes, we pause to discuss the activity and readings, and discuss what a grade means to them. They usually bring up grading as a comparison to a preset benchmark, or comparison to peers, or a measurement of effort. I tell them none of these alone is really fair or equitable, but to think of a combination of them as they self-assess. I explain why we are doing self-assessment and that this will help them become independent adults in their lives beyond the course, able to evaluate their own work and personal achievements .

5. Students answer a two-part survey (see sample here: https://bit.ly/MidSelfAssessSample) on their phones. First, they rate their own effort and consistency and quality of their work in the course (broken down by key things like class participation and key assignments), followed by what grade they aspire to in the course overall, how well they're doing so far, and a justification for the grade they gave themselves. The second part asks their feedback on the course: what is helping their learning and what they would suggest to make the course better for the second half of the semester. Recently, I added a question towards the end on how they feel about the self-grading process. Some people, especially traditionally high-achieving students, feel uncomfortable, and some are afraid of overestimating themselves.

1. **After mid-semester self-assessment grades are submitted**, I get back to each student and let them know if I agree with their self-assessment grades, and what they need to do to get their aspirational grade. For the most part, my own holistic

assessment of their grades is usually very close to theirs, and sometimes I give them a higher grade than they give themselves. Occasionally, some students overestimate themselves to an extent I cannot accept (e.g. they are missing work worth 20% and want to get an A- which would not be fair to other students at all) so I explain this to them.

2. **At the end of the semester,** students do a similar survey to the mid-semester survey. But they self-assess their final grade (see sample here: https://bit.ly/EndSelfAssessSample). This, coupled with a final reflective portfolio, is the final assessment of the course. There is little time to discuss their self-assessment grades, but if someone's self-assessment is too far above what I feel they deserve, I discuss with them. If students underestimate themselves, I give them the higher grade I feel they deserve.

This process has flaws. Not because it is subjective (numerical and alphabetical grades are also inherently subjective in that the teacher chooses the criteria, weight, breakdown) but because I am unable to give students 100% agency. Although the majority of students get the grade they gave themselves or higher, a few overestimate themselves, and I do not feel comfortable giving them those grades, particularly when they haven't submitted work at all that is worth substantial weight. I recognize that I am the one with power to give certain assessments higher weight and that learners do not have control over every aspect of their assessment and its weight. Also, as you will see from the learner feedback below, some felt they needed more guidance on the approach:

> 'This was helpful because the professor was transparent with us and most of us knew where we stood in terms of our grades and performances. However, I believe the self grading criteria could be more detailed to allow everyone to grade themselves as accurately as they could.' (Youssef).

Youssef's comment above implies an incomplete sense of agency, wanting more direction from the teacher. Perhaps rather than offering students criteria, I could spend an extra class session collaboratively developing criteria with them, ensuring all of them contribute to this process.

> 'It was great to be able to assess myself, because after we did the first self grading half way through the semester, I realized what aspects of the course I wasn't so good at so I started to work more on myself in these particular aspects. However, I felt a little uncomfortable putting the grade for myself because I did not want to seem like I'm complimenting myself or giving myself more than I deserved so I was very cautious.' (Toqa)

The caution of overestimating oneself comes to me occasionally from hard-working students. Like Toqa, Mai found the mid-semester self-assessment helpful.

> I' felt it provided a fair evaluation to our work. Also, the mid-semester assessment was a great idea because it made us realize our weak points that needed to be worked on; it was like some sort of wake up call. This was specifically true because in the assessment there was a question that asked us what can you do to improve our grade. This allowed for the setting of actual goals that the student believes s/he can achieve, which actually motivates him/her to work towards it and learn better through working towards achieving it.' (Mai)

Learner-contributed content and activities

This approach is inspired by Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), an approach originally developed for the US context of multiracial classrooms with students of variable socioeconomic background

(Howard 2003; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Its relevance to AUC is in the aspect of flipping the approach of assimilating students into the educational institution's (dominant) culture - in this case, the neocolonial US culture, rather than the students' (and my) own Egyptian culture. CRP creates a more 'synergistic relationship' between a students' community/home culture and that of school (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 467) and 'addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate' (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469).

While I try to bring in content relevant to students' own cultures, I also encourage learners to contribute content and activities to the course and encourage them to bring content from their own local and personal contexts wherever possible. Originally, I gave an assignment towards the end of the course, worth 5%, for learners to contribute one new material (reading, video, article, podcast) or activity to the course. I realized that some of their contributions can be really helpful, and they often relate to topics covered earlier in the course, so I started encouraging students to submit contributions during each course topic, and I recognized their contributions and invited them to present their contributions to the rest of the class. In some semesters, students did this on an almost weekly basis, which enriched the course and gave me material to add as essential in future semesters.

One semester, students suggested in their mid-semester feedback that we study more Egyptian-context digital literacies, so that semester (and beyond it) I added an assignment to find an Egyptian or Arab person or group who is using their digital literacies well (e.g., a Facebook group for activism or an Instagram or YouTube influencer) and to present this "exemplar" to the class. This assignment has proved to be inspiring, and I personally learned a lot: I learned about who and what inspires my students, and I have been inspired by their choices. Their choices are all added to a course Padlet, which we keep

adding to every semester so that we have a student-contributed repository of locally relevant examples of digital literacies.

In different semesters, a student suggested we expand our discussion of bias and equity to include Othering, and since then, an article on Othering has become part of the course; another student contributed an Egyptian story of Fake News that I incorporated into future semesters. Other students contributed pop culture clips, YouTube channels, and class activities to reinforce concepts we learned in class, and sometimes students chose the option to do surveys or case studies to expand our knowledge of how Egyptians practiced/viewed digital literacies, rather than contribute content. It is important to make space for every student to suggest things like this, not only the ones confident enough to do so in private or in public.

Learners can end up reproducing dominant narratives of what they think I expect or consider to be quality content. However, when they see how previous semester contributions from pop culture were valued; for example, it encourages them to recognize that what is valued need not be traditionally valued academic content.

> I' loved contributing to the course, it was like I added a piece of myself to the course and I let everyone learn something new just because of me. Maybe this is how it feels to be a professor? '(Toqa)

Choose-your-own-pathway

This approach is inspired by Crosslin's (2018) work on multiple learning pathways. The idea here is strongly based on heutagogy and giving learners the capacity to determine their own learning goals and pathway. Giving learners power and agency to do so requires a 'paradigm shift' for learners and teachers accustomed to always following a single pathway that meets outcomes predetermined by the instructor. It is a challenge to include multiple learner epistemologies

and treat them all as valid within one learning experience (Crosslin, 2018, p. 141). Crosslin (2018) started describing dual and then multiple learning pathways, from allowing learners to follow more instructivist/linear approaches to more connectivist/nonlinear approaches and allowing learners to switch between pathways when they felt they needed more scaffolding or more freedom at certain points.

In my course, I recognized that digital literacies are multi-dimensional, that different learners may have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others, and that learners may be more interested in one topic (e.g., online privacy) than another (e.g., use of social media for collaboration). Students had choices over *what topic* to focus on and how to learn about it.

I designed it as follows (slides and video on my course website: https://edtechbooks.org/-MtmV):

1. Learners read a general article differentiating digital literacies from digital skills and reflect on it.
2. Learners do an online self-assessment of their digital literacies to highlight their strengths and weaknesses and set learning goals for themselves.
3. Learners choose their own pathway to develop digital literacies in the course, with a large timeframe of around 4-6 weeks to work towards achieving their goals. They could choose both the topics that interest them, and the learning methods. The learning methods were one of the following:

    1. **Tinkering path**: learn via doing small assignments from an assignment bank (in this case, https://assignments.ds106.us/, categorized by which skillset the assignment develops). These were mostly quick and easy to do, so students on this path were asked to do six assignments.
    2. **Theory path**: learn via reading articles of their choice

(in this case, select from the *Mozilla Internet Health Report*, categorized by topic). These were not long articles, but some had new concepts, so students were asked to do three.

3. **Taught approach**: learn via self-paced learning modules and earn badges (in this case, from the *All Aboard* website). These took time, so students were asked to do two.

4. **Twisting path**: do a combination of the above, keeping in mind the different weighting. So, one pathway could be to do one taught module, one reading and one tinkering assignment.

4. Learners would write a reflection at the end, demonstrating their learning and why they made their choices.

A hidden advantage of this approach is that learners look at the options of topics are and think critically about which choice to make and what their goals and preferred learning approaches are. I could see from their reflections how some of them learned about themselves. For example, one student set out to do a twisting path, but after trying one tinkering assignment got hooked and stayed there. Others had left the assignment until the last minute and ended up doing the taught path for things they already knew about and as a result, didn't learn a lot.

'I did not really enjoy it because I ended up choosing a simple path in order to complete the assignment on time during my finals. However, maybe if I had started earlier and dedicated more effort towards this activity, I would've enjoyed it and benefited more.'(Khaled)

'I honestly thought this was the least interesting part in the course and the anomaly of the course. In the choose your pathway, I wanted to actually choose a reading and dissect but instead in the "theory" section I was left with

topics I found mostly dull, discouraging me from paying attention.' (Youssef)

Time management was a challenge here the first time I assigned this. Students were given a very large timeframe to work on these and advised to do something each week rather than do them all in one day, but many left them until the end of semester and felt squeezed for time and wished they had been given more.

> 'I really loved the fact that it was diverse and we were given many options to choose from. This allowed us to actually develop our weak areas or our areas of interests. However, I think it should be done in the beginning of the course in order to get the most out of it since later on we touch upon ma[n]y of those pathways in class.' (Mai)

In the second iteration of doing this activity, I discussed the activity weekly with students and reminded them to do it and asked them to share their progress. This second time, more students submitted early, and no one complained of feeling squeezed for time. In future, I may assign it slightly earlier and ask students to present to their colleagues in a quick presentation the key things they learned, so that all can benefit.

Students who managed their time better seemed to enjoy the activity more, especially those who took the tinkering path:

> 'I enjoyed the hands-on assignments... the tinkering path... it was the finals season and all my written projects and assignments were due. This assignment was a fun break from all that stress because it was all personal stuff.' (Toqa)

Conclusion

Nurturing learner agency is not a smooth path. Occasionally, I get a comment on my teaching evaluation complaining about vagueness in my grading practices. As mentioned earlier, students sometimes struggle to manage their time with assessments that have a relatively open-ended timeframe, but I have tried to lightly scaffold this by suggesting smaller deadlines throughout the semester not just towards the end, and it seems to have helped. However, perhaps it would promote agency better if I invited them to discuss how they might manage their time. Despite misgivings from local colleagues, I have never had students complain of having too much choice. In fact, they occasionally suggest alternatives to choices I offer. Many colleagues started seeing the value of promoting student choice during the COVID-10 pandemic.

One activity where learners have lots of agency, but which I did not cover here, is the project of developing choose-your-own-adventure digital narrative games on topics they are passionate about, as described here: https://edtechbooks.org/-qggr). Mai wrote "this was probably the best product of this course. This game really pushed me to get out of my comfort zone and be completely candid with myself and with the player. It was totally up to me to create the game on any topic I wanted; there were no restrictions whatsoever."

Another example is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, I invited students to switch their topic to a pandemic-related topic if they wanted to, and about half of them did so. Another thing that students learned indirectly while creating the game assignment was how to take agency over how they use tools. For example, Toqa wrote: "I can proudly say I have used it [Google slides] in a more creative way which was the game assignment. This makes me feel powerful and in control since I'm not just limited to what google slides is 'normally' used for." https://edtechbooks.org/-mQUd

I believe that every group of students will respond differently to attempts to nurture agency, especially if it happens in one or two courses but is not a university-wide system, supported by institutional policies. Beyond feedback on how particular approaches developed agency, co-authors wrote about how the course developed their sense of ownership over the course, confidence and lifelong learning. One sentence captures it succinctly: "We all had control over the course" (Toqa).

Mai here speaks about how she was already self-aware before the course, but the course offered her freedom:

> 'To be honest, I was already familiar with my weak learning points and my interests. The issue was that I didn't have the space nor the time to work on them. However, in the course, I was able to work on them due to the freedom of space we were provided with.'(Mai)

She also writes about the importance of feeling heard by the instructor and students, and of students having control over class discussions:

> 'The class discussions were always diverse and rich. Not only did the doctor listen to our ideas and our opinions attentively, but so did the class. This made me feel listened and valued. Also, in most classes, we went off topic and discussed other issues or ideas and the doctor was always welcoming and understanding and listened to us.' (Mai)

Finally, I wanted to conclude with a quote on how the course promoted lifelong learning beyond what is familiar in Egyptian education and towards critical citizenship:

> 'Us as Egyptians often associate learning as " a must" or something forced on us. But this course helped me look

at learning differently and I think this is a first step in changing the ideology I was brought up with. If I continue enrolling in courses like this one I'm sure that one day I would develop into a much better person that would be eager to learn alone without "having" to.' (Toqa)

Acknowledgements

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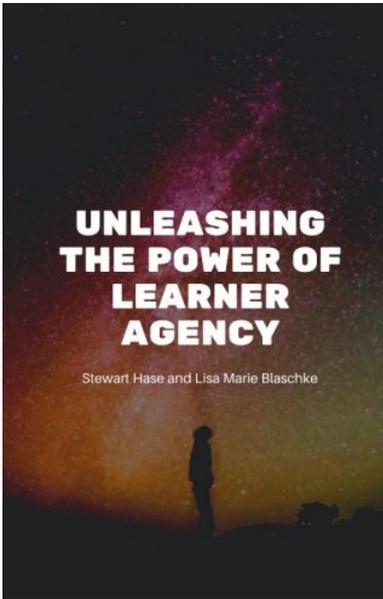
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