

COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING AS A TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY FOR YOUTH CITIZENSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

In a highly centralized educational system, the need for innovative, transformative pedagogies that trigger institutional reforms increased dramatically, especially in the context of social unrest and conflict that continue to shake the Middle East and North Africa region. Focusing on Egypt, this study questions the extent to which public and private universities in Egypt embark on initiatives for introducing and/or promoting community services and civic engagement among students. Special attention is given to community-based learning, also known as service learning, as a bottom-up approach employed by faculty members to navigate a centralized governance, to empower students and to serve local communities. Research has been conducted at a private, foreign university with a total of 46 participants (14 faculty members, 26 students and 6 community partners) (Megahed et al., 2017), and a study of "civic engagement initiatives in universities" in three Arab countries, including Egypt (El Ebrashi, 2017) are reviewed along with other related scholarly literature and national reports. The review of research shows similarities and differences between public and private universities in the approach and practice of community services and reveals related advantages, challenges and opportunities. Based on the research findings, the study concludes with a framework for integrating community-based learning across academic disciplines at universities for youth citizenship.

Keywords: Youth Citizenship, Community-Based Learning, Universities, Egypt.

1. Introduction

The aftermath of the Egyptian January 25th, 2011 revolution created an urgent need for innovative educational interventions to improve educational quality and services at universities in Egypt. In order to meet students' eagerness to play their roles as active citizens, many higher education institutions emphasized among their strategic priorities the importance of fostering citizenship values through community service and student engagement. In that context, this research focuses on Community-Based Learning (CBL), which is recognized as a transformative pedagogy that promotes student engagement and develops civic responsibilities; in turn it improves educational outcomes and job opportunities.

This research questions the extent to which public and private universities in Egypt embark on initiatives for introducing and/or promoting pedagogical approaches for civic engagement among students. To answer this question, I begin with an overview of the Egyptian context and education sector for contextualization. Then, a conceptual discussion of community-based learning, civic engagement and youth citizenship is provided to establish the theoretical framework of this paper. This is followed by a review of research studies undertaken on community-based learning and

civic engagement in Egypt to identify pedagogical and institutional approaches for youth citizenship and their related challenges and opportunities as perceived by Egyptian faculty members, students and community members.

2. The Egyptian Context

Egypt is the largest country in the North Africa and Middle East region in terms of its population. In 2017, the total population reached more than 92 million (92,128,271), with 49 percent being female, and 57.2 percent of the total population located in rural areas. Children and youth in the school-age cohort (5-24) represent 39.9 percent of the total, plus 11.3 percent aged 0-4. This makes 51.2 percent of the population in the age of pre-K-12 and higher education (CAPMAS, 2017, pp. 4-6). This marks Egypt as a home to one of the largest populations of school-aged children and youth in the world, with a high annual population growth rate of 2.1 percent. From a human capital perspective, this constitutes a challenge and an opportunity for national development; yet the unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2017 was estimated at 12 percent (CAPMAS, 2017). Educational services are offered by public and private providers, though the public education sector remains the main provider that serves the majority of the population. In the school year 2015 - 2016, for pre-K to 12 education, there were a total of 44,787 public schools with a total enrollment of 17,990,836 students versus a total of 7,235 schools enrolling a total of 1,938,751 students. In higher education, there were 24 public universities with 1,835,015 enrolled students, as compared to 19 private universities enrolling a total of 111,602 (CAPMAS, 2017, pp. 116-129).

Table 1. Egyptian Public and Private Education, School Year 2015 - 2016

	<i>Sector</i>	<i>No. Institutions</i>	<i>Enrollment</i>
Pre-K - 12	Public	44,787	17,990,836
	Private	7,235	1,938,751
Higher Education Universities	Public	24	1,835,015
	Private	19	111,602

Source: CAPMAS, 2017, pp. 116 - 129

The high demand for educational services in Egypt created public pressure to improve the quality of learning and teaching and expand educational opportunities. Thus, from the 1990s till the present, education has been declared as a national priority. During the 1990s, several educational reform projects and initiatives were undertaken and partially or fully funded by international bilateral and multilateral organizations (e.g. the World Bank, the European Union and the United States Agency for International Development). Examples of these reforms included the Basic Education Improvement Project, the Secondary Education Enhancement Project and the Education Reform Program. These state-led reforms aimed at improving opportunities and access to basic education, enhancing the quality of education (focusing on teacher development), and establishing a supportive, decentralized system for continuous quality improvement. In addition, attention was given to community education, including community schools, supported by UNICEF since 1992, and girls' friendly schools (Ministry of Education, 2014). Similarly, in higher education, attention was given to enhancing its quality and relevance to the labor market. In the 2000s, the Ministry of Higher Education, with support from the World Bank, embarked on a major Higher Education Enhancement Project that tackles different areas such as quality assurance, faculty and leadership development, and information and communication technology (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010).

In 2003, the document of national education standards was released, followed by the establishment of the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Education and the founding of the Professional Academy for Teachers. All these national bodies have

functioned in parallel to the Ministry of Education and its equivalent entities for quality assurance and in-service training, which already existed at different levels of the system (the state, province, district and school levels). The situation in higher education was not much different. Although public universities maintain a level of autonomy, they were all obliged to establish units and centers for quality assurance and accreditation as well as for faculty and leadership development. Within the quality assurance movement, community service was further emphasized as part of the main mission of the university along with education and research.

3. Conceptual Framework

Community-based learning (CBL) is one of the means to enhance community services at universities. CBL could be described as a form of pedagogy that fosters civic engagement. It is defined as “a teaching method which enriches learning by engaging students in meaningful services to their schools and communities” (Hutter, 2008, p. 12). Young people apply academic skills to solve world issues and link established learning objectives with community needs. Schools, universities, NGOs, youth clubs and student associations could organize the activities (Hutter, 2008). Similar to the existing literature on CBL, in this study the terms Community-based learning and service learning are used interchangeably. CBL is a pedagogy which combines academic study with community service and which is becoming increasingly popular throughout the world. It aspires to achieve both personal and academic development for students and civic goals of responsibility towards the community and social justice. Community-based learning is believed to be grounded on the experiential learning theory, a pedagogical philosophy which links theory to practice in an attempt to enrich the learning experience. Through community-based learning “concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation” all become components of the classroom (Khabanyane & Alexander, 2013, p. 105).

Universities typically denote “civic education of students as an explicit goal” (Bringle and Steinberg 2010, p. 2), where “civic engagement can occur through teaching, research, or service that is done in and with the community and includes a variety of activities” (Bringle and Hatcher 2009, pp. 38-39). Civic engagement is seen as an active process where the campus mission supports the use and cultivation of the skills and knowledge of members of the campus to improve the quality of life in the community (Bringle and Hatcher 2007, p. 80). There is an increasing recognition amongst governments, international development agencies, NGOs and young people of the importance of youth civic engagement. “Civic engagement is one of the key components for positive youth development and the successful transition to adulthood. It allows young people to practice and exercise citizenship, develop life skills and enhance their employability and learning outcomes. Youth development programs can significantly impact communities, increasing social capital, decreasing violence, providing key social services and meeting overall community development needs” (Hutter, 2008, p.7).

The above discussion indicates that community-based learning as a pedagogical strategy employed in academic disciplines fosters civic traits among students (Megahed et al., 2018). However, CBL is not the only means to promote community services at universities in Egypt. According to El Ebrashi (2017), Law no 142/1992 stipulated the establishment of Community Service and Environmental Development entities on the university and its schools' levels. The main roles of these entities are stated to "encourage universities to take part in serving surrounding communities and the society at large by setting policies, linking research to development, developing students' skills, and organizing conferences and public lectures" (El Ebrashi, 2017, p. 18). This paper focuses on these two approaches for community services at universities in Egypt; I referred to the first as a pedagogical approach, represented by integrating CBL strategy in teaching, and to the second as an institutional approach employed by the university and school leadership.

In examining these two approaches, I explore whether a "normative conception of active citizenship" or "a cultural/inclusive approach for youth citizenship", articulated by Hart (2009), is promoted at Egyptian universities. According to Hart (2009), A cultural citizenship approach seeks to uncover and challenge the cultural and institutional practices that support fixed notions or normative assumptions of 'ideal' citizenship, which serve to exclude citizens who may differ from these norms, for example, in terms of identity, culture or beliefs. For cultural citizenship theorists, equality of citizenship is only realisable in a context where the experiences and views of citizens themselves, whatever their background, culture or social location, are both recognised and respected" (p. 645-646).

Within this theoretical framework, the pedagogical and institutional approaches for community services at Egyptian universities are examined. The next section explains the research methods used in this study.

4. Research Methods

This study employs qualitative methods in examining community services and community-based learning at universities. It depends on interviews with faculty, students and community partners to examine their perceptions of and experiences with community-based learning. Interviews were conducted at a private, foreign university with a total of 46 participants (14 faculty members, 26 students and 6 community partners). The data from the interviews with students, faculty and community partners were transcribed and the Nvivo software was used for the analysis, to sort the data by questions and cases. Then, the cases were coded and analyzed thematically. The most powerful quotes were used as examples to demonstrate different as well as similar perspectives. This was part of a more comprehensive study that assesses the impact of CBL on fostering civic-minded graduates. The author of this paper has undertaken the lead of its design and implementation (Megahed et al., 2017). In addition, a report on "civic engagement initiatives in universities" in three Arab countries, including Egypt (El Ebrashi, 2017) is synthesized. Thus, literature review as a method that includes systemic and thematic analysis was also employed (Cronin et al., 2008). In this study, related scholarly work and national official resources were thematically reviewed and synthesized to establish the contextual and conceptual framework as well as to draw and support the study findings.

5. Findings

The findings of this study show similarities and differences between public and private universities in the practice of community services for youth civic engagement, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Public and Private Universities' Practices for Community Services

Practice	Public Universities	Private Universities
Approach	Institutional- driven(top-down)	Individual- and institutional-driven (hybrid)
Program	University-led and school-led programs	University-led, individual Faculty-led, and student-led programs
Purpose	Application and community service	Application, community service and civic engagement

Source: El Ebrashi, 2017; Megahed et al., 2017

Table 2. is developed based on the examination of El Ebrashi's (2017) report, which covered two public universities and two private universities. It worth mentioning that one of the two private universities is also the institution where the interviews used in this study were conducted (Megahed et al., 2017). According to El Ebrashi (2017), while the identified practice in the two

public institutions meets the criteria of community-based learning (CBL) and "university-led programs" for civic engagement, student civic engagement is not the recognized purpose of CBL programs at these institutions. These programs are provided in certain schools and specializations to serve their specific major. They are offered as practicum or internship programs: for example, in the faculty of medicine, where students can gain hands-on experience, applying what they have learned and providing services to poor communities during their internship year. Thus, it is not surprising that community-based learning programs were not found, for example, in the faculties of Business and Commerce or Arts at public universities (El Ebrashi, 2017, p. 19). On the other hand, at only one of the two institutions were the community-based learning programs integrated across different disciplines and defined along with the university-led program for the purpose of application, community service and youth civic engagement (El Ebrashi, 2017; Megahed et al., 2017 & 2018).

In addition, findings of interviews conducted at this private institution indicate that CBL and community services are supported to intentionally foster civic engagement among students. The findings of the interviews also identified advantages, challenges and opportunities for further integration of CBL for youth civic engagement. Examples of advantages include the agreement among participating interviewees that the main aim behind integrating CBL into academic courses is to develop students' civic traits by enabling them to engage in the community, realize its problems, and become a catalyst of change. Some faculty members stated that civic traits in students were developed through engagement and participation in projects that work with marginalized communities (orphanages, senior citizen homes, etc.). This developed a sense of obligation towards serving these communities. For example, a faculty member said that her students "talk a lot about the impact [of CBL] on their sense of civic engagement and social responsibility." Another faculty member stated that such development depends on the experience that the students go through. However, the majority of interviewed students recognized the civic development in their characters and stated that they became more aware of their wider community.

As for the identified challenges, interestingly the university hybrid approach in support of these programs was criticized by the majority of interviewed faculty members. For example, it was mentioned that there is no centralized unit for organizing the program, but rather different entities. In addition, employing CBL in the courses is totally initiated by the faculty member as there is an absence of institutional support in identifying, contacting, and planning with a community partner. These were all considered problems. The majority of the interviewed NGOs agreed that this is not a partnership with the university, since their communication is through personal connections with professors and students directly. There is also no strategy nor plan to base a partnership on, and thus no sustainability.

Nonetheless, many opportunities for further integration of CBL across academic disciplines were identified. Examples include the high level of awareness among students, faculty members, and the university administration of the value of promoting and further integrating community-based learning for youth civic engagement. This is in addition to faculty members' active initiatives for creating long-term opportunities for students' engagement with NGOs in order to ensure effective cooperation and reciprocal outcomes. Based on these findings the following framework is developed for integrating CBL as a transformative pedagogy across academic disciplines.

5.1. Framework for Integrating CBL across Academic Disciplines

Based on suggestions and recommendations offered by participants in the Megahed et al. study, a framework for integrating CBL across academic disciplines is developed to include aspects for improvement to be implemented on institutional, program and pedagogical levels.

Institutional & Program Levels -Building on previous efforts towards a systematized sustainable

university-community partnership, the research findings revealed an essential demand for a more organized system with a strategy, plan and shared vision between the university, its community (including faculty and students), and the NGOs. This was highlighted by some faculty members and by all the interviewed community partners. This would guarantee continuity and sustainability for the partnership between the university and community partners. From the faculty's perspective, it was also expressed that it's important to have an entity or a unit at the university to link professors to community partners. A faculty member stated, "there are needs to have an organization or some committee at the university that their job is to link us to community partners." He also mentioned the importance of establishing a database with information on NGOs, CBL courses, and activities; as well as to have "a physical place; people whose names are on a list...it's their job to set up a relationship with community partners...and ... meet with teachers." Similar to the faculty, community partners suggested establishing an entity at the university that could be reached in order to initiate and facilitate contact among interested parties.

Participants also suggested that a needs assessment be conducted to identify the needs of different programs/ departments, students, and NGOs in order to have targeted and meaningful impacts on all levels. This, in addition to constructing a proper follow-up and evaluation system, would guarantee the achievement of learning outcomes and the effectiveness of CBL courses for students, NGOs, and the community. According to some students, there is a need for an evaluation from the university's side. This point is also asserted by the community partners who suggested to have "a three-way evaluation: the student, the professor/university and us." Thus, there is a need for establishing a monitoring and evaluation system in order to make this partnership sustainable and impactful.

In addition, it is important to develop a long-term plan that allows students to build on the previous work of their colleagues, which could be achieved by having "better synchronization and coordination among the faculty and the university...so, when each student comes in, they will build on what the previous students did...we as an organization have a strategic plan, so we know where we are heading" (a community partner).

As part of this framework, continuous efforts by the university to raise awareness about and promote community-based learning and civic engagement are needed in order to explain their importance to faculty, students, and community partners. Some faculty members suggested that the university should hold more orientation sessions and training workshops for faculty about CBL. Another suggestion was to increase communication on campus so that there is more systematic knowledge on what CBL initiatives are being done. This could be achieved by constructing a website, where faculty members can showcase positive CBL initiatives and success stories.

Furthermore, the university may consider creating incentives or some kind of motivation for both faculty and students to encourage them to participate in community based learning. It was also mentioned that CBL provides opportunities for field research; if this is further highlighted and promoted, it would encourage professors to adopt such approach and pedagogy.

Pedagogical Level -The recommendations related to the pedagogical level of CBL courses are crucial, as they offer insights on how the CBL component could achieve the course intended learning outcomes. These included the following: The first demand stated by students was to improve the faculty competency in teaching CBL courses. According to students there is a need to make the CBL component clear throughout the course description and through the professor's guidance. Professors should also focus more on and pay attention to the practical part of the course while giving less attention to the theoretical part. This was viewed as the true essence of "experiential learning." Another student said, "maybe each course can have a description. I'm not sure if all courses do, but my course didn't have the description that it's a CBL and I didn't really know." They believed that it's the professor's responsibility to elaborate on the CBL component of

the course and to allow for engagement with the community; as said by a student, “I think the professors have a role in this, they have to announce if it’s a CBL course or not and based on that, if it’s a CBL course then they should allow students to engage in the community and do activities. I think that’s the most important thing.”

Secondly, workshops for technical support to be given by experts, community partners, or students who have taken CBL courses are recommended in order to share their experiences and stories. When asked about suggestions for improving CBL, a student suggested “having workshops or talks with people who are experts in the field, sharing their stories..., [or talk with] a graduate” (IS1). Similarly, community partners suggested to offer sessions to faculty to help them visualize how to integrate CBL into their academic courses. As stated by a community partner, “we’re trying to talk with some of the professors to help them visualize and envision ... because some professors are not able to see how could a given course lend itself to becoming something relevant to the community... So maybe that’s one of the services that we [could provide as a] technical support ... to help them visualize and ... bring in components that they were not aware of.”

In addition, faculty members need to focus on the product and learning outcomes of the course rather than on fulfilling a certain number of service hours. In order to achieve a deep engagement with the community, interviewed students wished to have longer-lasting and more impactful projects. This was also highlighted by the community partners, who suggested that the focus of CBL courses should be on getting something meaningful and valuable out of taking these courses. Thus, there is a need to create long-term opportunities for students' engagement with NGOs in order to ensure effective cooperation and reciprocal outcomes.

It was highly recommended to have clear guidelines on how to implement CBL at the program and course levels. The guidelines should be available for faculty members in order to guarantee consistency and ensure fairness among students in different academic disciplines. Students expressed that some sections in multi-section courses implement a CBL pedagogy, while others don’t. This created widely varying experiences from one class to another. For example, in one section, the professor elaborated on the CBL component and the students are fully aware of it. In another section of the same course, the professor might have overlooked the CBL component, although it is also listed as CBL. A student stated that “I think if the course is meant to be CBL then all professors should abide by that.” One faculty member raised the same issue saying, “making it clear and making it attainable; not rules but guidelines.” Therefore, there is a need for developing clear guidelines for CBL at program and course levels that aren’t too rigorous/standardized as to constrain the academic freedom of faculty, and not too vague where faculty who did not offer CBL courses before feel discouraged.

Conclusion

This study discussed community services and community-based learning as a transformative pedagogy for promoting civic engagement among students. Differences among public and private universities in the practice of community services and CBL were mostly in their approach and purpose that were found to be top-down versus hybrid in public versus private institutions, respectively. The purpose of community service and CBL in public institutions is articulated to connect university to community, and to develop students' skills by real life experience where they can practice their theoretical knowledge and serve local needs. Only one private institution intentionally supports and integrates CBL and community service across all its academic disciplines to promote civic engagement and social consciousness among students. Although the hybrid approach for community service and CBL practice was criticized for the need of a more institutionalized system, it allows different faculty members and students from different disciplines to be proactive in initiating and undertaking activities for community services, hence performing as active citizens. The hybrid approach (in comparison to the top-down centralized

approach) is found to be more aligned with the cultural, inclusive approach for youth citizenship (Hart, 2009) where there is a wider space for individual faculty members and students to take the lead in undertaking programs for community service and civic engagement, a case that is found at a private university but not in public institutions. Based on suggestions offered by participants in this study, a framework for integrating CBL across academic disciplines has been recommended to include aspects for improvement to be implemented on institutional, program and pedagogical levels.

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Appendixes

Appendix I. Student Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview is to engage the university students (from different programs/disciplines) in group discussions to:

- Identify positive and negative experiences with CBL courses in regards to teaching performance, course content and design, outcomes for the students, and partnerships with community organizations;
- Provide suggestions for the needed institutional/faculty support/change for integrating CBL across academic disciplines and promoting university-community engagement;
- Establish ways to improve CBL courses at the university.

The protocol includes guiding questions to be used in focus group/individual interviews with students to map the diverse CBL experiences across the disciplines and solicit the student perspective as related to the main research questions.

1. Why did you choose to enroll in CBL course(s)?
2. How do you describe your experience with CBL courses in terms of the course content and partnership with a community organization?
3. From your perspective, how do CBL courses differ from NON-CBL courses (teaching strategies, interaction with students, assignments, course objectives)?
4. What do you consider as the most positive a) activities, b) outcomes, and/or c) experiences from your CBL course(s)?
5. What do you consider as negative a) activities, b) outcomes, and/or c) experiences from your CBL course(s)?
6. Have you experienced any challenges taking CBL courses at the university? OR Have you experienced any challenges taking CBL courses in comparison to non-CBL courses? If so, please give examples
7. What do you consider as the most added value from taking CBL courses? (Knowledge, skills, community service, etc...)
8. What would you suggest to improve CBL courses at the university?
9. From your perspective, what would encourage students to take CBL courses?

Appendix II. Faculty Member Interview Protocol

1. The university defines CBL as "...a teaching methodology that advances course learning goals through service to a partner community." To what extent do you agree/disagree with this definition?
2. What factors motivate you to employ CBL pedagogies in your classes/courses?
3. Have you received training or workshops organized by the university or other institutions that enable you to design and offer CBL courses? (if yes, please describe)
4. Some universities are using the term "civic-minded graduate" to describe what they want their students to achieve. What do you think that term may mean?
5. To what extent do your CBL courses develop students as civic-minded graduates?
6. What are the most valuable outcomes of your CBL course for students? Please give examples: academic, personal, career, and/or civic outcomes.

7. What would you consider as best practices employed in your CBL courses? In other words, what are the class or community-based activities of your course that foster civic mindedness? Please give examples.
8. What are the most valuable contributions of your CBL courses to: the university at large? Please give examples. A. Your community partner and/or the community you serve (the beneficiary)? Please give examples.
9. What are the types of support that you received from your department/the university which enabled you to deliver your course(s) and achieve the intended learning outcomes? Please give examples: administrative support, financial support, academic support, other.
10. What are the obstacles/challenges that you confronted at the course level, if any?
11. What are the challenges that you confronted at the departmental/institutional level, if any?
12. How did you overcome these challenges?

Effectiveness of CBL as related to respective academic disciplines and their contribution in promoting the university-community engagement.

13. How do you perceive the contribution of CBL courses in promoting the university engagement with the community?
14. To what extent do(es) CBL course(s) in your discipline/disciplines, at your department, contribute to community development? (Type of courses, research projects, extracurricular activities, etc.)
15. In addition to CBL courses, what are the other types of community partnerships/services/activities available for students at the university?
16. To what extent do these activities/services contribute to a) your students' research and b) your research/publications? (Research outcomes)

Suggestions and Recommendations

10. What are your suggestions/recommendations to improve CBL across the academic disciplines at institutional, departmental, and/or program levels? (Suggested research agenda and/or community development projects; structural, regulation changes)
11. How can CBL be more effective for community partners and/or beneficiary community?
12. Would you be interested in participating in a university-wide interdisciplinary CBL project? Why or why not? (AUB example/having one project that the entire university works on throughout the year)
13. Do you have any additional comments/suggestions that you'd like to add?

Appendix III. Community Partners Interview Protocol

The purpose of this interview protocol is to engage community partners in group discussions to:

Identify the perception of the the university-community partners on the collaboration with the university faculty in support of community based learning;

Assess the needs and potential contributions by the community partner in support of a multidisciplinary framework for the university.

The protocol includes guiding questions to be used in focus group/individual interviews with community partners related to the main research questions.

Community Partner Profile: Founding Year (), Years of partnership with the university (less than 3) (3-5), (6-8), (9-12), (more than 12)

Effectiveness of Partnership

1. What type of activities are you are engaged in with the university?
2. What motivated you to engage in a partnership with the university?
3. To what extent your partnership with the university as an institution or with the university faculty supported your programs, activities, and your contributions to the community?
4. What do you consider as positive aspects of your partnership with the university?
5. What are your reservations based on your partnership with the university faculty and/or students? or other activities with the university?

Recommendations

6. What would you recommend to improve the university-community partnership?
7. What are the types of activities that the university students and faculty can engage in to support your organization?