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Unlearning learned helplessness by volunteerism and service-learning at the Iraq American University

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Abstract

As our research topic, we investigate ways in which gender equity can be improved in the educational setting, at all levels via comparative qualitative research methods. Specifically, we look at educational delivery in terms of learned helplessness. As a result, the early stages of learning are important to avoiding learned helplessness, but the principles of inclusivity are beneficial at any stage of education. In conclusion, Service Learning, especially those projects designed with community action in mind, is the centerpiece of our struggle to break the cycle of learned helplessness.

Keywords: Equity, Pedagogy, Gender, Girls, Helplessness.

Desaprender La Impotencia Aprendida Por El Voluntariado Y El Servicio De Aprendizaje En La Universidad Americana De Irak

Resumen

Como nuestro tema de investigación, investigamos formas en que se puede mejorar la equidad de género en el entorno educativo, en todos los niveles a través de métodos de investigación cualitativa

comparativa. Específicamente, nos fijamos en la entrega educativa en términos de impotencia aprendida. Como resultado, las primeras etapas del aprendizaje son importantes para evitar la impotencia aprendida, pero los principios de inclusión son beneficiosos en cualquier etapa de la educación. En conclusión, Service Learning, especialmente aquellos proyectos diseñados con la acción comunitaria en mente, es la pieza central de nuestra lucha para romper el ciclo de indefensión aprendida.

Palabras clave: equidad, pedagogía, género, niñas, impotencia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term learned helplessness was coined in 1965 by Martin Seligman. A result of experiments in classical conditioning, which is behavior learned by the association of one thing with another, learned helplessness is a failure to try to leave a negative situation because one has learned that one's attempts will be useless. It has long been established that learned helplessness has special implications for girls and women (DWECK, DAVIDSON, NELSON & ENNA, 1978 & Mahmud, Akinwale, Khan, Alaraifi, 2019). and especially in terms of its connections with depression (KIEFER, 2009); in addition, females may be biologically prone to learned helplessness (DALLA, EDGEComb, WHETSTONE & SHORS, 2008). PAYNE (2013) points out that learned helplessness is intertwined with generational cycles of poverty. No one, however, is immune—rich or poor, male or female—and perhaps in this time of unfathomable cruelty, ecological

disasters, and political incompetence across the globe, we are all especially eager students of learned helplessness.

Learned helplessness includes internal, stable, and global attributions. Internal attribution is a belief that one's failure comes from one's own constitution. I cannot do math because my brain is wired wrong. (If I were employing an external attribution about my poor math skills, I might claim that I was never taught proper math skills.) If I believe that my brain is permanently wired wrong and that I will never learn math, I am using a stable attribution—in other words, I believe that my condition will not change. I might have a specific internal attribution: my brain is wired wrong for math but it is fine for almost everything else. In a global attribution—and here is where learned helplessness becomes dangerous—I would believe that because my brain is wired wrong for math, it is wired wrong for all subjects, and I might as well not even try. Learned helplessness, then, is a belief in ultimate futility that manifests in a failure to have agency (SHABBIR, ABBAS, AMAN, & ALI, 2019).

2. METHODOLOGY

Established in 2015 as a hub of knowledge and ideas about gender equity, The Center for Gender and Development Studies (CGDS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) combines scholarship and teaching with community development. We aim to ensure that academic initiatives lead to normative change and

improved gender relations, with the ultimate goal of gender equity. As a vector of social change in Iraqi and Kurdish societies and the MENA region, we seek to support women in their struggle to regain the voice and agency that belongs to them and to support women and men working together to achieve a healthy society.

We at CGDS are especially sensitive to gendered learned helplessness, for example in the way that educators might be unintentionally encouraging learned helplessness among female students by being kind or polite. Educators promote learned helplessness without being aware of it whenever we allow girls or women in our classroom to remain passive, for example providing answers or solutions for female students while insisting that male students find their own way, thus developing their confidence and self-reliance.

Male students, though, are by no means immune to learned helplessness, and unhealthy masculinities can be just as damaging to social and intellectual growth as can be unhealthy views of femininity: both result in warped perceptions. In any case, our focal points include promoting healthy masculinities and femininities, so that men and women can build a better society together. We believe, also, that programs that overcome or mitigate learned helplessness will render education more accessible and more useful to everyone.

The solution to learned helplessness appears simple enough. From the ancient philosophy of Stoicism to contemporary self-help movements, the answer lies in a measure of acceptance of the way the world is, while changing the things that one can, along with a healthy

dose of self-worth and dignity. Confidence and self-worth are learned skills and fundamental skills. But how can we teach them in a way that they become habitual?

It comes as no surprise that parents and educators are important agents in helping children and adults overcome learned helplessness. But if the cycle has been learned from the family, family members are unlikely to be agents of change. Educators, of course, can be effective teachers about life skills, but in general, we are not trained in psychology and sociology, or at least not in the depth required to facilitate real change in mental patterns and behaviors among our students. Counselors, of course, can be effective, but at least in our situation, in Iraq, there is (generally speaking) a dearth of professional counseling, a reluctance to seek it, and a financial cost that is prohibitive (USAK, KUBIATKO, SHABBIR, DUDNIK, JERMSITTIPARSERT, & RAJABION, 2019).

Another group, however, has great potential to help unlearn learned helplessness: students' peers. PIERCE (2005), suggests that it is the dynamics among high school students that create classrooms that can be comfortable, indifferent, or perilous to students. ALTERMATT & BROADY (2009) establish the importance of early peer interaction regarding learned helplessness even among younger children—fourth-through sixth- graders. Children who often got help from their friends, they found, reported fewer maladaptive responses to failure. In contrast, learned helpless responses were predicted when friends engaged in off-task talk, when children discounted their failures, and when children or friends evaluated the task negatively.

In an effort to draw on the potential of peers to unlearn and prevent learned helplessness, and to address the multitude of humanitarian issues in our area, Dr. Choman Hardi, the founder and director of CGDS, founded The Action Group (TAG) in 2015. We are not the first, of course, to connect peer activities with resilience in the classroom and beyond (BROWN, EERNSTMAN, HUKÉ & REDING (2017), on creativity and resiliency in ecological disaster). The fundamental idea of this student-led group is that any student who is bothered by a socio-economic injustice should come to the TAG meetings, come up with a proposal, and put it into action with help from the other students. TAG has developed and carried out several projects, including helping local children who are living with cancer, volunteering at the school for the deaf, and celebrating International Kids' Day.

The latter was an idea of just one student; 30 students promptly joined in. Another student had the idea for an Arabic reading group for teens in our refugee camps, but she graduated before it could be implemented. Indeed, not all projects get off the ground. The principle remains, however, that young people working together and encouraging each other to address pockets of social injustice provides an antidote to learned helplessness by claiming some agency appropriately. Individuals, in fact, are agents of change. At the TAG launch event, the Kurdish singer Bahjad Yahya had these important words for the new members:

We are young or students. Do we have the ability to change those difficulties that we face? For sure, if we see all of humanity. If

we just remove 500 people from the history of humanity, we would not have the civilization we now have. Honestly, you are the generator of your society. Everywhere the elites govern, the reason why Europe is civilized is because its elites are governing it; otherwise, the normal people are just there to live. There may be someone who never read even a sentence. There are people who have not had the ability to finish school. Therefore, the things you do, for sure, you will achieve your goals (DURFEE & ROSENBERG, 2009).

While TAG thrived, with over 100 members, it required some internal motivation from those who joined, meaning that many of those students will have had already self-confidence and self-esteem. In order to provide this opportunity of community building on a larger scale, we developed service-learning courses. (In fact, as of this writing, TAG dissolved, and other student volunteer organizations have filled its place.)

3. RESULT

Service-learning, also known as community engagement, is a well-established pedagogy in higher education. The benefits of a campus that offers service-learning include hands-on application of theoretical skills; interaction with the community, decreasing the town and gown split; and integration of academic and practical knowledge. It fits well with promoting gender equity in education (Williams, Ferber, 2009 & Usak, Kubiato, Shabbir, Dudnik, Jermisittiparsert,

Rajabion, 2019). Especially important for our purposes, service-learning is the practice of being a responsible citizen in the community, region, and world, and it offers the satisfaction of making an immediate and real difference through higher education (MAHMOOD, ARSHAD, AHMED, AKHTAR, & KHAN, 2018).

Introducing service-learning on campus can be a challenge. Some faculty and other stakeholders might tend to view it with suspicion, seeing it as an extracurricular activity for credit, or an easy course. Luckily, we did not have to invent the wheel: service-learning has been established not only as a valid way of learning but also as a methodology of pedagogy. (Community Roots, 2014). These and other myths of service-learning and the necessity of emphasis on rigor are explained well in the California State University-Long Beach faculty manual (CSU-Long Beach Faculty Manual). Additionally, there are plentiful examples of established service-learning programs all over the world (see Appendix B).

Service-learning exists in three basic environments: the local community, the regional community, and the global community. More than discrete volunteer work, service-learning is a dynamic process of interchange between academic and applied knowledge. In general, the project is conceived in the classroom, developed in collaboration with the outside community (local, regional, or global), carried out in dialogue with both environments (i.e., campus and the larger community), and processed, evaluated, and archived as both an academic and community experience.

When CGDS realized that service-learning was a powerful force to combat learned helplessness, we found that there were many opportunities for service-learning projects at our university. Some projects were already well-developed and needed only interest and structure to take them to the level of formal service-learning experiences. Such projects included some of the above-mentioned activities of The Action Group; another example is the efforts of an Academic Preparatory Program (APP) instructor to involve students in environmental volunteerism such as cleaning up a nearby lake and its grounds. In fact, unbeknownst to us, our APP program (which prepares our incoming undergraduate students in American academic skills including English) had already established a rationale and summary for service-learning (AUIS APP Service Learning, 2016). Other potential activities that could be transformed into service-learning courses include our own activities in CGDS such as introducing ideas of equity in K-12 classrooms, providing sexual harassment prevention workshops, and raising awareness about systematic oppression. As another example of a potential service-learning course, the Language Club at AUIS developed a pilot project of offering various courses in Arabic, English, French, Kurdish, Persian, and Turkish. Our colleague Dr. Tobin Hartnell's work in Cultural Heritage, furthermore, also has great potential (Cultural Heritage at AUIS). Finally, established volunteerism at the refugee centers could also be organized and structured (AUIS Refugees).

Social Justice begins with common readings on inequity and oppression (the full syllabus is Appendix C) after which the students

do fieldwork, for example in refugee and IDP camps, or in organizations for children with disabilities. The class also teaches the concept of privilege, about which students wrote a brief reflection paper. Several of these papers testified to the success of this course; one, in particular, stood out, an excerpt of which we include below with the student's permission and anonymity (the full paper is Appendix D).

I finished my primary school as the number one student. I was indeed a proud kid having my entire family behind my back and supporting me both financially and spiritually so I can study and get the best possible grade. I was not always at the top. In my 5th grade, there was a girl in my class, she was smarter than me and in that year for both of the seasons, she topped my grades. I felt humiliated, so I started to study more and my family was always at my back to provide what I needed; a new book, writing implements, a new tutor, and even my own studying desk. So, I challenged her to see which one of us can get higher grades in the 6th grade. Having everything I needed I got the lead and told XXX I won, because of my hard work and nothing else. You have two eyes I have two as well, it was a fair game and I am better than you. That year I got the grand award in my primary school which was a small toy car with 4 huge tires. I was so proud of it that I never used it but gave it to my mother to keep it for me as a token of my hard work.

Three years ago, near New Year's Eve, I went to a restaurant I got greeted by a girl who did not recognize me at the first glance but I did, she was XXX, she was working as a waitress. I introduced myself

as the smart guy who got higher grades than her in 6th grade, but she had forgotten about me and it took her a while to remember me. She then told me a few sentences that up to this day bring tears to my eyes, a nightmare that haunts me every New Year's Eve. She said and I quote, my dearest YYY, it was never a fair game with you, my parents could not afford to buy a notebook for all my classes so I only had two notebooks, a pencil, a rubber. My grandfather died three weeks before the finals and my grandmother two days after him. I was followed by a guy who threatened me if I do not tell his friends that I am in love with him, how can you call this a fair game? For a moment in my life, I felt that how much I hurt this girl unintentionally, for a moment in life I was not a smart guy but an ignorant one. I just could not say anything but leaving the restaurant with wet eyes. I told my mother to take down that small car which was still in its packet, and I went back to the restaurant and gave that to her which she refused at first but later accepted it. I later found her a better job as an accountant but I was shocked again when I realized that she actually got a degree in pharmacy, but she could not even pay for the transportation which was why she was working a part-time job. It taught me a lesson that the society privileged a rich male over a poor female, and nothing is fair when you are over-privileged.

4. CONCLUSION

By facilitating opportunities for our students to gain perspective about their role in society by encouraging them to work with their

peers to heal and better their communities, even in small ways, we are also helping not only to unlearn but also to prevent learned helplessness by letting them see that changes can be made. The most important change is that of agency, to realize that one is a generator of society.

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