

*The Civilization Sequence Program of the American University of Beirut
Forum Workshop: Revisiting Great Books/Culture Studies Courses: Theory and
Practice*

Program

Friday, May 14

Keynote speech Provost Ahmad Dallal (AUB) 15:00 – 15:30

PANEL I Probing approaches to teaching “culture”: 15:30 – 17:30

Ferial Ghazoul (AUC): 15:30 – 15:45

Hülya Adak (Sabancı): 15:45 – 16:00

Presentations from the floor and discussion: 16:00 – 17:30

Peter Shebaya (AUB)

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (AUB)

Amal Dibo (AUB)

Nadine Panayot (Balamand)

Christine Lindner (Balamand)

Peter Williams (Balamand)

Coffee Break 17:30 – 18:00

PANEL II Structure and Subjects: 18:00 – 20:00

Samira Aghacy (LAU): 18:00 – 18:15

Nicholas Hopkins (AUC): 18:15 – 18:30

Presentations from the floor and discussion: 18:30 – 20:00

Mona Amyuni (AUB)

Raid Samaha (AUB)

Mohammed Rihan (AUB)

Sami Baroudi (LAU)

E. Sensenig Dabbous (NDU)

Christine Lindner (Balamand)

Peter Williams (Balamand)

Saturday, May 15

Coffee & Pastries 9:30 – 10:00

PANEL III Sources and Resources: 10:00 – 12:00

Arda Ekmekji (Haigazian): 10:00 – 10:15

Boulos Wehbe (NDU): 10:15 – 10:30

Presentations from the floor and discussion: 10:30 – 12:00

Peter Shebaya (AUB)

Robert Gallagher (AUB)

Christine Lindner (Balamand)

PANEL IV Challenges in Teaching: 14:00 – 16:00

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (AUB)

Marlene Kanaan (Balamand): 14:00 – 14:15

Hakan Erdem (Sabancı): 14:15 – 14:30

Presentations from the floor and discussion: 14:30 – 16:00

Mona Amyuni (AUB)

Nadine Panayot (Balamand)

Robert Gallagher (AUB)

Christine Lindner (Balamand)

Coffee Break 16:00 – 16:30

PANEL V Concluding Discussion for Future Direction: 16:30 – 18:30

Souad Slim (Balamand) and Joshua Andresen (AUB)

May 14-15, 2010
College Hall, B I.
American University of Beirut

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Organization

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Resumes of the participants interventions:

Dr. Samira Aghacy

Addressing the audience in Panel II “ Structure and Subjects” Dr Samira Aghacy, Dean of Arts and Sciences at the Lebanese American University, focused on the C.S. Program from the date of its establishment at L.A.U. in the seventies till our present day . Aghacy mentioned the stages and the difficulties the C.S. program went through and the complaints of the faculty and the students . She at the end proposed an outlook which might help in developing in our students a desire for a life- long pursuit of knowledge. The C.S. courses started with three courses organized chronologically and spanning many centuries from Gilgamesh to the present. Dr Aghacy mentioned the various questions that faced both faculty and students from the beginning. One question was whether the faculty should be granted autonomy in teaching different texts while adhering to the same period chronologically, and whether minimizing the texts or abbreviating the reading would endanger the claim of structuring a coherent and comprehensive text. Some teachers argued that teaching C.S. might distract them from their area of specialization and expressed reservation of having non specialists teach these subjects, although, as Aghacy mentioned, those faculty can bring a fresh and new perspective to the material. Another issue was the possibility of adding feminist text or other marginal or subaltern groups in the curriculum, and whether these writings would appear imposed or will have a real place within the narratives that informed the curriculum.

A main complaint was what is called “basic texts”. The question arose as to the meaning of “basic”. What would be the criteria here, and whether there is a danger of making the humanities a refuge of obsolete books. Aghacy, mentioned Galileo and Kepler’s books referring to Allan Bloom’s “*The Closing of the American Mind*” that placing these scientific works within the humanities is “equivalent to naming a street after them or setting up a statue in the corner of a park”.

Coming to the students, Aghacy mentioned their complaints about the lectures, the speed in covering the various material, the inconsistency of grading among the various sections and the feeling of inferiority as they study other cultures especially when these cultures have been for them a source of humiliation and exploitation.

Aghacy then moved to the suggestions proposed by the faculty. One is to organize the program along major themes instead of a chronological approach. This, as was suggested, might lead to the fragmentation of knowledge exposing the students to receive bitty information from here and there without covering the pieces that could not fit the theme. Another question was teaching the Scriptures and the impossibility of teaching religion through a secular or a religious perspective. Aghacy wondered if this is liberal education when one tries to steer clear of any controversy in these subjects or when discussing issues of feminism, multiculturalism, deconstruction, race and gender, musical works, works of visual art and social history...

This is when, as Aghacy mentioned, Gloria Fierro’s: *The Humanistic Tradition*, was introduced. Though the book assumed a global and multicultural rather than exclusively Western perspective, still Western texts took precedence. The book is selective omitting major figures and treating others briefly with very short excerpts arranged chronologically. This, according to Aghacy, might incite students to go beyond the

limited amount of work they read in C.S. to become life-long learners. The faculty, however, complained that the book goes too far in pairing cultures together and that without supplementary resources, it can end up as High School material. Aghacy proceeded after this survey on the history and development of C.S. program at L.A.U. to focus on the changes that the university introduced in the past few years. Planning to secure accreditation by NEASC (The New England Association of School and Colleges) which the university got in April 2010, a broad based Core was established to reinvent a curriculum more relevant to contemporary issues. The students can choose their courses from the Humanities, literature, Philosophy, Religion, etc. This, according to Aghacy, helps those students to think for themselves and not simply defer to authority.. Though the C.S. is now optional, the proportion of students taking C.S. is still high. The advantage here is that those who take C.S. are really interested in the material. The students, in addition, do not have to take these courses sequentially and this, according to Aghacy, has the advantage of helping the students understand how the present is articulated in relation to the past.

Aghacy then affirmed that two or three required courses of C.S. do not provide a panoramic overview of Western Civilization or any civilization for that matter. Cultivating a historical sense or sensitizing students to the process of historical change, can also be done in history or a philosophy or in an English Literature course. In this way, students will be able to receive the same kind of liberal education that they would have acquired in the civilization courses. Students, Aghacy continued, can take courses in Islamic philosophy and history under liberal Arts Requirement and experience these courses taught by specialists in more depth. Thus the aim of the new program at L.A.U. is to reconcile the old and the new, the classics and the modern. The goal is to transmit knowledge and to help the students develop critical thinking, proficient writing, scientific and quantitative reasoning, the power of synthesis, aesthetic sensibilities and a well developed sense of professional and technical knowledge and work ethics. Aghacy concluded by a reflection on the nature of knowledge. Knowledge, she affirmed, is overwhelming and vast. The duty of a university is to light a candle to show the students the way. The students should be directed to become life-long learners. They should be given the tools and the basic skills necessary for analysis, synthesis, understanding and communication. We, as teachers, are committed to ensure that our students understand, appreciate, and retain interest in the long life pursuit of knowledge.

Dr. Sonja Mejcher Atassi

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi , as a discussant in |Panel 1, Probing approaches to teaching culture, focused on diversity as a main perspective in teaching culture, diversity of disciplines, diversity of areas and diversity of gender.

Starting with the diversity of disciplines, Atassi pointed to the importance of adding Art history to the various literary and philosophical disciplines in CVSP . Atassi added that Incorporating visual material in teaching culture will open the door to so-called low or popular culture. Atassi mentioned the various ways these disciplines have been revisited through the works of Edward Said, Spivak, Foucault and others. The question to think of

is to what extent should we incorporate these revisions and consider them primary texts to add to the syllabi in a moment of self criticism and reflection.

Coming to the diversity of areas Atassi alluded to cultural circulation and hybridization. Quoting Spivak's book "Death of a Discipline", she stressed the importance of "movement between areas, or "crossing borders"

How can we, added Atassi, while being in a third world, take the lead in some revisions? How can we in the region introduce more diversity without being bound to Western innovations? To what extent have we incorporated Middle Eastern /Third World culture and civilization and other decisive factors in the formation of CVSP?

Moving to the diversity of gender, Atassi drew the attention to the importance of this diversity in studying culture. This diversity is lacking at A.U.B. where women writers are not well represented in the various courses. Atassi mentioned that she is the only woman in the professorial rank, and as an Assistant professor, at the lowest rank when it comes to decision making.

Atassi concluded by presenting a vision with two possibilities. One is to turn into interdisciplinary center of research which exist only , according to her, on paper at A.U.B. because this diversity of disciplines is not present among the faculty added to it two factors: the euro –centric outlook in the core courses and the resistance to change. Here Atassi thanked the workshop and its organizers for providing the opportunity of discussing these issues.

The second possibility is to strengthen the link between CVSP and other academic departments at the universities.

Dr. Nadine Panayot Haroun

As a floor discussant in Panel 1, Probing Approaches to teaching culture, Nadine Panayot started by defining the two concepts, culture and civilization. Culture, she stated, can exist in itself whereas civilization cannot be called a civilization if it does not possess a certain culture. Culture is when one attempts to change himself, while civilization is when one attempts to change the world.

Panayot mentioned the challenge of teaching |C.S. in an era of globalization in the Middle East and in the twenty first century.

Coming to the approaches of teaching culture, Panayot confined herself to three major methods, first, the traditional approach where the text book is used as a basis for teaching students and examining them, the second is where students and teachers interact and the book is used as a guideline. This will help the students to get involved and to move from a passive to an active state.

The third approach, as Panayot stated, is using a case study model where the teacher takes a case study model referring to a current situation to teach a subject matter. This last approach, Panayot added, is used in prestigious universities where the students will be enabled to evaluate the different situations and see the differences and similarities in the different countries at different epochs.

According to Panayot, a combination of the three methods is the appropriate approach. Using the textbook, interacting with the students and finding a current situation to teach a subject matter.

Panayot, then, stressed the importance of creativity. Cultural studies programs should be accompanied with practical illustrations, experience and understanding about them. This will help students to identify the various problems themselves. Panayot concluded by affirming that there is no universal approach to teaching students. The challenge is for every teacher to find the right method in a specific situation. In other words, to bridge the gap between knowledge on the one side and student on the other.

Nadine Panayot in *Challenges in teaching*, Panel 1V, focused on the importance of theory and practice. Theories, as she stated, are only tools to describe our observations. This is how in teaching culture, our theories are limited by our empirical understanding.

Panayot criticized the outdated schooling system in Lebanon and the difficulty of handling such students at the university. Are we to graduate technical doctors and engineers who have no knowledge of the major literary works? How can we introduce these students to the intellectual pleasure?

Panayot continued by drawing attention to the necessity of Cultural Studies. One cannot lighten the subject to deprive it of its essence, nor can we replace it by other courses considered more relevant to Science students. How can we graduate a medical doctor for example not knowing the difference between history and prehistory or other intellectual issues.

Panayot added that it is our duty to fill the gap left out by the schools in the education of the new generation and to find the correct method to convey the message and keep the oldest texts relevant to our students. This passion to communicate ideas becomes crucial when we realize that the future of mankind starts with the education of the next generation. Panayot concluded that the quality of our life depends directly on the quality of our education.

Dr. Marlene Kanaan

Addressing the audience in Panel 1V, *Challenges in Teaching*, Marlene Kanaan departed from her experience in teaching CS courses for 22 years at the University of Balamand, and as a coordinator of these courses at the same university. She started with a brief survey of the history of the CS courses at Balamand then proceeded to describe the difficulties and the challenges encountered in teaching these courses and the ways to meet these challenges in the interest of both the teachers and the students.

CS(CVSQ) at Balamand was launched in 1988 during the Lebanese Civil war with the intention of promoting dialogue about Christianity and Islam among the young generation, introduce students to Middle Eastern culture and other important ideas and issues about the Modern world and promote the study of culture and civilization and the ability of analysis and profound thinking perceived lacking in the formation of students. The curriculum was divided into four Courses from 201 to 204. These courses started from Ancient Civilizations continuing till the Modern world. The program was subject to

scrutiny several times focusing on reading Great Books and teaching in both languages French and English with Arabic used for the final course in the sequence. New texts were introduced with the focus on the study of religion as an aspect distinctive to Balamand C.S. Program. In addition, Kanaan added, the program organized from the start series of lectures, circle of readings, trips, plays, exhibitions etc, thus playing the axe of the cultural life at the university.

Moving to the difficulties in teaching CS courses, Kanaan questioned the possibility of introducing such courses to students who have no notion about these courses or interest in them. Kanaan raised several problems as to the method of teaching with the diversity of students and their different backgrounds and levels and whether teaching should be instructor or student centered. Another problem is the way to teach, coordinate and direct these courses with their diversified disciplines, the philosophical, historical, religious, poetical, and how to simplify these texts without compromising their essential meaning. Kanaan concluded this section by reflecting on the strength and weaknesses of these courses and whether the CS program respond to the educational need of the student when education is catering nowadays to the masses with the purpose of pleasing society in getting a diploma instead of pleasing the needs of the individual.

Kanaan confessed that the C.S. program, though attractive in itself, has proved to be an agonizing experience for her. Here she alluded to the inexperienced and unqualified teachers, who are parachuted into a program that does not correspond to their field of interest. This, Kanaan added, will not help the students neither to love the material nor acquire the necessary knowledge or develop a sense of analysis and critical thinking. Mentioning the students, Kanaan deplored their weak language, their poor intellectual baggage and background to analyze or synthesize ideas and their lack of interest in reading texts. The problem is not only in the curriculum, she said, but in the students themselves who are happy to share a culture of common opinions and not a culture of personal thought. Kanaan added that there are few students, however, who are capable of pursuing the program and its objectives.

Basing her argument on the role of the instructor to motivate students to think independently and develop their critical thinking, Kanaan concluded by stating the following points that might prove suitable to both students and instructors:

- Relate the themes to contemporary life to stimulate debate.
- Avoid lecturing in the classroom.
- Trace the themes back to their origin through the study of various texts.
- Visual aids to make courses more lively.
- Oral presentations in class.
- Abrogating the texts.
- Inviting eminent guests to the classes.
- Choosing only qualified instructors to teach these courses.
- Coordinate with other colleagues to participate or give talks in their discipline.
- To find to each CS course a solid basis by creating a pivotal point that can become the “problematique” and the axe for debate.