Thinking with bell hooks and Paulo Freire: A Syllabus for the Digital Middle East

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Published on: Jun 06, 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/f1f23564.1f310314
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At the Open/Social/Digital Humanities Pedagogy, Training, and Mentorship Conference, I presented a syllabus proposed for a Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC) course at the University of Washington. Entitled Digital Middle East: Social Media and Gaming in Iran, Turkey, and Arab Countries. The syllabus emphasizes online games, gaming culture, and social media, while the pedagogy for the proposed course seeks to disrupt traditional paradigms of the classroom through integrated skills labs. In doing so, my aim for the course is to take on a radical care approach to reflecting on the needs of students and building a learning community that holds its own agency (Friend). The course would put forth the process of decentralizing top-down structures by using critical pedagogy—a reflective and critical stance to social realities—and emphasizing the works of bell hooks (1994) and Paulo Freire (1970). Through a flipped classroom that foregrounds critical digital pedagogy, I seek to create meaningful interactions that deemphasizes transactional relationships with students. By having classroom activities that use the medium of gaming and lend itself to meme and digital project creation, students will independently discover their interests, engage in critical thinking, and maintain their agency.

During these activities, I stress imperative face-to-face and skilled-based learning that deconstructs content-based material. By providing a flexible space to engage in creativity, students will then learn how to produce a project that interweaves knowledge about popular culture, uprisings, and recent media histories within the Middle East and gain essential digital humanities skills. Rather than instituting the methodology of depositing knowledge into the students and becoming the depositor, my desire is to have a classroom setting emphasizing a two-way street with knowledge. To create this two-way-street, the course must emphasize that neither the student nor the professor knows everything so that critical literacy and curiosity can be attained and maintained by both sets of learners. An active learning environment also requires prioritizing materials with intentional content that the instructor curates for accessibility and exploratory purposes so that students then can produce projects they own and can market outside of the classroom for their needs. My goal is therefore to disrupt the “banking” system as a pedagogical mode of delivery for the Digital Middle East course. When systems emphasize the “banking” system through educating students, knowledge becomes a gift upon an empty vessel rather than active learner with agency (Freire 72).

Engaging in praxis as a professor is a critical activity in higher education. Praxis requires that the professor reflects on and acts for the good of the learning community by centering justice and change. Oftentimes praxis centers the process of skills to be realized and embodied, whereas pedagogy can be described as the model of performing classroom praxis (Diversi et al. 190). Praxis of conscientization means the “process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform reality” (Freire 27). Through a praxis of conscientization, students will gain an awareness of the social reality of Middle Eastern online communities through reflection and how to thwart the mythological and dominant mystification of people who tend to be othered, and then learn to process and decodify situations, histories, through critical reflection (Freire). To use
this type of praxis affords an empathetic approach to teaching, classroom problem-solving, and community building that ultimately lends itself to student knowledge on the lived experiences of Middle Eastern communities.

The Digital Middle East course will also create a space for curiosity, critical, and ethical thinking where meaningful interaction outside the dominant philosophies of academic knowledge by deemphasizing top-down learning structures and even anthropological tourism. It is through this praxis that students understand the historical and current struggle against injustice in these societies, usually outside dominant paradigms of knowledge, that creates moments of resistance within societies on edge with the status quo. Despite the syllabus actively situating grades and percentages, a withdrawal from learning and praxis, the course will ask the imperative and mundane: “how did you learn?” and “what grade do you deserve?” This de-emphasis on grading, I urge (much like bell hooks) to imagine how education can be a practice of freedom like movements and non-movements in Middle Eastern societies during the Arab Spring, Gezi Park Protests, and the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran (hooks; Bayat). Through a transgressive critical digital pedagogy students will hone their social media, blogging, meme creation, and tweet searching skills and will accomplish learning tasks. The technical skills that students will walk away with include pixlr editing tools for memes, video editing tools, and WordPress. I am therefore advocating for skills labs in lieu of homework and at the same time engaging students in critical thinking through intentional content in a flipped classroom. Students will have the opportunity to accomplish small tasks such as reading excerpts and writing up initial responses to technical and Middle Eastern socio-historical content, while also having the freedom to intellectually engage with other students and finish tasks expeditiously. By self-actualizing and collaborating with one another, I will be able to teach the role of orientalism and othering as it appears among scholars, in media, and in popular observers of the Middle East so that students will think beyond the paradigms of white saviourism and examine neoliberal thinking that drives educational biases. While this requires a rudimentary understanding of Edward Said’s Orientalism, and Gayatri Spivak’s “Does the Subaltern Speak?” students will find ways to seriously learn these concepts through processes of play.

Through comparing video games to creating blogs, I argue that through the pedagogical approach of a flipped classroom, students will have a community-oriented learning environment to explore and play with interactive multimedia. The Digital Middle East course will thus afford students to creatively engage in the subject matter, and understand the positionality of cultures, peoples, religions, and nation-states in the Middle East. I believe that taking this approach, both I as a teacher and the students will collaboratively build out concepts or themes based on the content through digital technologies. This way, I may mentor, but also show that I am willing to create community with my students through my own willingness to experiment, express, and even make mistakes. Giving space for experimentation and error is the edge where learning begins. For the practical elements of the syllabus, together we can think through problems, and provide technical solutions.
Some limitations of this course may include a digital divide, meaning lack of access to online resources, or even other barriers that students experience day-to-day. Therefore, it is imperative to address socio-economic as well as other needs early on during the course. Scaffolding in opportunities for students to express needs is therefore imperative to teaching this course. This may consist of an initial questionnaire at the beginning of the course to simply inquire what students may need to overcome throughout the quarter or semester and continuous teacher-student debriefing to hear what they are getting out of the content. Though I plan to teach this course sometime in 2023, I am questioning the implications and importance of a potential flipped classroom. I also am critical of how to use digital tools and the implication of the syllabus, while also creating a free and available tool kit to academics in and outside my university after the course. My praxis seeks to situate affect, emotion, and sentiment for both the subject matter and the students’ experience (Ahmed; Barad; Berlant; Berlant and Stewart; Stewart). As such, a student may walk away with a better understanding of the complexities of interaction in online and offline spaces. To accomplish this objective, the course must institute critical digital pedagogy as a method to marry practice with theory and critically think about institutions and social barriers, while holistically weighing society, ideology, technology, and politics (Friend et al.).

Works Cited


**Acknowledgements**

This syllabus and rationale have been deeply inspired by my mentors Professor Arzoo Osanloo, Professor Selim Kuru, and Professor Aria Fani. I would like to express a special thanks to Professor Kuru for encouraging me to work on this syllabus as part of the preliminary exams in 2020. The Digital Middle East would not have been possible without institutional donors throughout the past few years. With awards, grants, and fellowships from the Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, the Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute, Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at University of Washington, and the Social Science Research Council’s Social Data Research and Dissertation Fellowships, I had the fortune of working on and returning to the syllabus so that I could guide my thinking with bell hooks and Paulo Freire. Last but not least, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions.

**Appendix 1: Syllabus**

Digital Middle East

Social Media and Gaming in Iran, Turkey, and Arab Countries

**Overview and Course Content**

Video games and social media are increasingly part of everyday life, impacting our shared social norms and values across the world. This course explores the socio-cultural relevance and use of social media and video games in the Middle East. It is designed for students to learn about the role of social media in Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey, with specific emphasis on the Arab Spring, Gezi Park Protests, and the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran. With special attention, we will examine online communities and the construction of national identities through video games. By examining Middle Eastern digital social phenomenon, we will envision an embodied yet online form of engagement in the making of Middle Eastern communities.

For the first half of the quarter, we will focus on social media. A broad range of topics will be covered, including the public sphere, censorship, diaspora communities, activism, government sanctioned trolling, and gender and sexuality in online communities. We will reflect on the state’s interest in censorship and authoritarian political culture within these online spaces. Next, we will bridge Middle Eastern social media and gaming with meme culture. During the second half of the quarter, we will focus on games and gaming through frameworks of Islam, identity construction, and digital orientalism.
Learning Objectives

The course will provide the following knowledge for students:

- To provide introductory knowledge on the Digital Middle East and its meanings.
- To show students the important social media trends in the Middle East.
- To assist students in understanding the transformations and disjunctions in Arab, Iranian, and Turkey’s social media usage and culture industries.
- To expose students to dominant discourses on the study of social media and video games, including cultural, theoretical, and comparative frameworks.
- To familiarize students on transnational engagement of diaspora communities through social media.
- To critique the role of the culture industry in creating narratives for the state.
- To learn critical thinking skills when using social media, blogging using WordPress, and video gaming.

Course Structure

Before each class, I will post a short lecture and students will engage in online discussion on Canvas about the materials. Throughout the quarter, students will interact on Canvas each week on the course readings in class. This will give students an additional opportunity to interact with their colleagues and to think digitally yet critically about the Digital Middle East. Classroom time will be used to learn technical skills and integrate course concepts into digital projects. The course will be enriched by two field trips to the Media Arcade for resources on digital access and an opportunity to play games at the HUB Gaming Lounge (funded by NELC).

Course Materials and Platforms

This course does not have a textbook. All materials and tutorials will be provided through the Canvas page. The assigned games will be provided to the students.

Course Assignments

Weekly Discussion Board Posts (50%):

For the weekly posts, you will have the opportunity to discuss the readings and the digital artifacts on Canvas, work together to solve digital problems, and ask questions. This requires one original post (approximately 100 words), and then two response posts to your classmates. These are due each Tuesday by 11:59 pm, starting with week 2.

Digital Object Essay or Video Essay (20%)

The mid-term essay or video is approximately 1,000 words on a chosen digital artifact, which can be either a game, set of memes, or hashtag, pertaining to the Middle East. You will write or record a critical essay on the object using course content. The essay is due on 5/3 at 11:59 pm.
Final Essay (30%)

The final essay is approximately 3,000 words on a series of games, gaming, or social media phenomenon using methods of either ethnography, comparative analysis, computational social science, or discourse analysis. We will workshop your essay drafts on 5/10. You will also have an opportunity to present in person or record a video essay on your idea in the form of a short lightning talk. For the final product, you may choose to write an empirical essay, or one based on a theoretical topic. This essay is due during finals week on 6/9 by 11:59 pm.

Tentative Weekly Course Schedule

Week 1: Introductions and Contextualizing Online Space

Session 1, Course and Syllabus Review

In-Class Excerpt:

- Zayani, Ch. 1: “Mapping the Digital Middle East: Trends and Disjunctions” in Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age (2018)

Session 2, Social Media and the Digital Middle East

Excerpts from:

- Fuchs, Ch. 2: “What is Social Media?” in Social Media: A Critical Introduction (2013), pp. 32–50
- Zayani, Ch. 1: “Mapping the Digital Middle East: Trends and Disjunctions” in Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age (2018), pp. 1–31

Skills Lab: Tweeting with purpose and intent.

Week 2: Mediated Social Movements and the Public Sphere through #revolution

Session 1, Iran 2009 Green Movement and Turkey’s #occupygezi

Excerpts from:


Vatikiotis and Yoruk, “Gezi Movement and the Networked Public Sphere: A Comparative Analysis in Global Context” in Social Media + Society vol. 2 no. 3 (2016), pp. 1-12


Skills Lab: Search via Twitter the following hashtags: #occupygezi, #CNNFAIL, and #iranelection, #iranprotests

Session 2: The Arab Spring

Excerpts from:

Peterson, Ch. 4: “Mediated Experience in the Egyptian Revolution” in Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age (2018), pp. 85–108

Imre and Owen, Ch. 5: “Twitter-ised Revolution: Extending the Governance Empire” in Social Media and the Politics of Reportage: The Arab Spring (2014), pp. 105–119


Skills Lab: Search via Twitter using hashtags such as #ArabSpring and #mohammedbouazizi. What are some other important hashtags used for movements?

Week 3: Activism, Censorship, and Diaspora Communities

Session 1, Diaspora Community

Excerpts from:

Akhavan, Ch. 1: “Reembodied Nationalism” in Electronic Iran: The Cultural Politics of an Online Evolution (2013), pp. 13–34


Skills Lab: Comparing online blogs and social media content
Session 2, Media Censorship and Government Crackdowns

**Readings (pick 3):**


**Skills Lab: How to blog with WordPress**

**Week 4: Online Communities**

Session 1, Beyond Social Media Movements

**Readings (pick 2):**


Skills Lab: Comparing video blogging with written blogs, and video essay format

Session 2, Gender, Sexuality, and the Digital Divide

**Readings (pick 2):**

- Serberny, Ch. 5: “Women’s Digital Activism: Making Change in the Middle East” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), pp. 109–124
Skills lab: How to use free software to make videos (Windows PC editor for video essays), VLC Media player, and XMedia Recode

Week 5: Introduction to Video Games

Session 1, Play and Fun as Cultural and Political Phenomenon

Excerpts from:

- Bogost, Ch. 3: “Fun Isn’t Pleasure, It’s Novelty” and Ch. 4: “Play is in Things, Not in You” in Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games (2016), pp. 57–120

Skills lab: Learning how to identify and parse out video game mechanics, cultural content, and semiotics in games

Session 2: Methods for Analyzing Games and Online Communities

Excerpts from:

- Malliet, “Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis” in Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Research vol. 7 no. 1 (2007), gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet

*Visit Media Arcade*
Week 6: Culture Industries and Identity Construction through Games

Session 1, What is the Culture Industry?

Readings (pick 3):


In-class gaming:
- *Siavosh* (2014)

Session 2, Games and Gaming in the Middle East

Readings (pick 2):

- Šisler, “Virtual Worlds and Digital Dreams: Imaginary Spaces of Middle Eastern Video Games” in *Digital Middle East: State and Society in The Information Age* (2018), pp. 59–84

In-class gaming: *Unearthed: Trail of Ibn Battuta* (2013)

*Digital Object Video Essay due [date] by 11:59 PM*

Week 7: Trolling and Memeing on Social Media and in Online Video Games
Session 1, State Sanctioned Trolling, and Memes

Readings (pick 3):

- Dahdal, “Using Collaborative Gaming to Engage Arab Youth in Cultural Memes” in *Journal of Social Media in Society* vol. 5 no. 3 (2016), pp. 316–343

Skills Lab: Search for memes on Pepe the Frog and the Middle East. Create your own memes on movements based in US socio-cultural contexts

Session 2, Workshop Final Essay

**Week 8: Representation of the Middle East in Games**

Session 1, Digital Orientalism in Games and Gaming

Excerpts from:


**In-class gaming:**


Session 2, Islam in Games
Excerpts from:


- Šisler, “Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam: New Media and the Communication of Values” in Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption (2009), pp. 231–258.

In-class gaming:

- Engare (2017)

Week 9: Presentations

Session 1 & Session 2, Final Essay Lightning Talk (choose pre-recorded lightning talk or in-person presentation)

Week 10: Wrap Up

Session 1, No Class, Memorial Day

Session 2, Reflections and eSports Club Fieldtrip

Week 11: Finals Week

Session 1, Final Essay due by 11:59 pm PST

Grading Scale

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