Will Our Students Leave Us One Day?

word cloud of education-related terms

Student disillusionment with the educational process is not just a by-product of online knowledge; it is an indication of a serious ailment that afflicts our educational mentality and thus our system. Memorising and memory testing teach us to retrace the lines over and over again, mimicking an authority that is no longer there. Our students are already aware that knowledge exists in the open air around them, a knowledge that is much bigger than the teacher, the classroom, and the educational institution.

By Diana Al-Salqan

The answers oftentimes lie in the basics. Curiosity and thirst for knowledge are intrinsic to human beings; and diversity is another rule of nature. Differences in needs, interests, and abilities are obvious in a single classroom, whether for sixty students or fifteen, so what about the differences that are present among various groups of students, various learning environments, or even various generations? If education succeeds, it is because an act of learning or "progress" – not memorisation – has taken place. Success in a learning environment means that such basics are respected and later nurtured in a way that leads to meaningful and useful results; and I stress here meaningful and useful for both the student and society. This is true whether the learning process takes place using a smart board in a fancy building or under a tree using cardboard boxes. Such basic issues in education do not require donor countries or huge budgets. If they are absent from the discourse of those who lay the foundations or policies, it is an indication of a deeper problem.
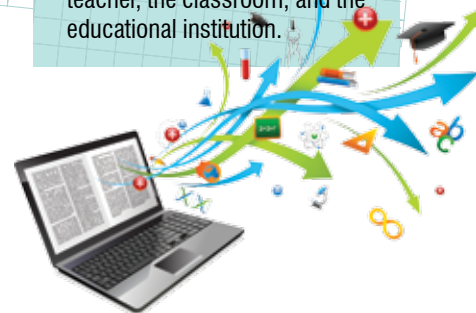
Providing knowledge or the thinking fuel that can be used to solve problems – whether personal or societal – can be encouraged through enhancing research skills and projects. Research is one piece in the puzzle to accommodate individual differences that exist in students' abilities, interests, and needs in learning. The teacher or the person immediately involved in the learning process is another piece. The teacher has a central role to play in ensuring the quality of education and must therefore have a say or a choice in the process. Unfortunately, the university system in Palestine is drifting further and further away from issues that matter in educating generations. For example, in our tertiary education system, issues such as rote learning,

inflated classrooms, standardised exams and textbooks, misuse or over-use of testing, inappropriate or badly designed assessment criteria, and, sadly, sometimes poor physical conditions still plague the system. The industrial and Western societies from which we adopted this system have reconstructed and reformed their educational institutions in many ways and, most importantly, in ways that guarantee perpetual renewal of ideas and thus change.

Offering an online component within academic programmes is a major change that Western universities are adopting, and one that I will focus on as an example. Both students and administrators in Western societies have wholeheartedly embraced such a revolutionary tool in education. A countless number of online courses exist these days and offer information on numerous issues that range from politics to literature, language learning, career advice, mathematics, and even the science of genetics. Students can listen to lectures by such prominent personalities as Salman Khan, Glenn Wilson, Muhammad Yunus, Noam Chomsky, and many other world-renowned professors, politicians, and scientists from institutions such as Harvard University, London School of Economics, and Stanford Graduate

School of Business. The cyber world is open not just to well-established institutions but also to new learning ideas, lectures, and institutions from around the world, such as the free Khan Academy.

Some online courses in the West are used to underline good practices in education and respond to the basics of good teaching, such as accommodating student differences and various learning strategies through offering remedial optional tutorials for weaker students or more advanced optional work for the hard-working student. Such courses can respond to the visual factor that some students need to enhance learning, for example. Offering specialised courses is yet another advantage; and flexibility is a huge plus that can cross geographical

boundaries and – if quality is ensured – make extra revenues available to the educational institution.

In order to address the scepticism that surrounds online teaching – regarding the lack of face-to-face or personal teaching and quality – certain answers are still needed. Online courses require hard work, flexibility, and innovation, elements that are counter to the traditional options we stress in our education system and mentality. Good online courses are different from the ones provided by our universities that are mainly workbook- or lecture-oriented. These courses at local universities come to reinforce the same mentality of rote learning and traditional practices in teaching. They retrace the same lines and hence are not flourishing.

Online courses offer great opportunities even for the progressive liberal education systems in the West. If modern Western education systems are already becoming more adaptive to changing social trends and needs, what effect could such a tool have on an educational system that is stagnant in its approach and ideology, deteriorating in its statistics, and crippled in its ability to transform and develop?

Adapting or improving the education system is not just an educational or a political choice; it is a human attitude towards younger generations. Imagine the following scenario: a young boy is explaining to his father what he (the son) knows about the "proper and new ways of raising a child." The father, dumbfounded, has a few options to deal with the situation. One, he could completely discredit the son by ridiculing and/or even refuting his approach. Two, the father could ignore it totally and consider it an amusing comment. Or, as a last option, the father's response could reflect a whole new situation. The father could check the son's source of information, using this new situation to digest his son's changing character, interests, and mind-set. The father could stop at this phase of understanding or he could take it a step further and react by either speaking to his son or making certain changes.

The first two, in my opinion, are reckless attitudes that result from lack of respect or from ignorance and/or selfishness. The third attitude is more difficult and time consuming, yet it is based on a humbler position – towards knowledge and younger generations – and, more importantly, it is based on an attitude of caring. Although the first

two choices may seem more natural responses than the third, there is a world of difference between them.

A situation at the university has triggered similar reflections on my part. In one of my classes, where the students present their own work on a controversial topic of their choice and interest, a junior student stood in front of the whole class to present his ideas about education. He is registered in a series of Harvard University lectures about teaching math. The student compared his new knowledge of "how teaching math should take place" with the way he was being taught math. His conclusion revealed his disappointment in the lack of new math-teaching methods at the university.

Another example is a junior student who joined an English-language course for beginners. Later in his third year, when he joined a more advanced and specialised English course, I noticed that his language skills had improved much more than those of his fellow students. I praised his progress and asked him what he attributed it to. He said that he had taken advantage of all the possibilities that exist on the Internet. He followed online grammar lessons, listened to audio versions of articles to improve his pronunciation, engaged in online conversation sessions, and even improved his spelling and sentence structure, all through resources that are available to all but that are used only by the few who are savvy enough to find them or who are willing to use them.

These examples could provoke the first two attitudes I referred to: indifference and irreverence, or they could be seen as wake-up calls from our younger generations who are constantly being met with indifference to their educational problems and needs. Why would students go to a boring, useless (in their opinion) lecture when they could at any time listen to a world-renowned lecturer who excites them and challenges their brains with new information? Why would students be content with white

and black workbooks to improve their foreign-language skills while there is a world of excellence out there at their disposition? Students can do it on their own. There are online videos that present real-life situations with real people who are native speakers of the language. They can benefit from online sessions with real people, all built around specific grammar or vocabulary tasks designed by specialised linguists.

With the development of biometric identification, some of these well-established universities could offer some of their certified, quality online courses to students anywhere in the world. They could offer not just new and interesting information, but also information that could be used in the workplace as well. Our students already know about the ailments that plague the education system because there is an enormous world of knowledge around them ready to be accessed and grabbed.

Time is the best filter for the future. In my view, however, failure to enhance good practices in education – such as self-learning, free thinking, teacher reverence, and other practices that reinforce basic needs in learning – is a failure to adopt a caring human attitude towards our younger generations. It is better for our society to adapt to changes that motivate progress rather than to wake up one day unexpectedly and unprepared in its arms.

Diana Al-Salqan is an author and educator who taught English language, reading, and writing for more than ten years at Birzeit University. She holds an M Phil degree in European literature from Cambridge University, in the United Kingdom, and a BA degree in English language and literature from Birzeit University. She has always tried – wherever possible – to use local and youth-related issues in her English teaching materials and has found positive results. She has authored and compiled teaching material for advanced English language courses at Birzeit University.