Teaching Cultural Studies in Tunisian Universities: Post-Theory in Limbo

Sami NIGHAOUI*

Abstract

This article examines key issues in the conception of the content and methodology used in the teaching of Cultural Studies in Tunisian universities by setting out the range of areas where education policymakers and curriculum designers fail to grasp the rationale behind the very idea of teaching the course. The discrepancy between what should ideally be taught and how it provides a backdrop for the general argument that the difficulty with teaching Cultural Studies lies not so much in its inimicality to disciplinariation as in the effort and skills required in the process of delineating goals and scopes for the course. A critical overview of the Cultural Studies curriculum eventually helps to identify the flaws and pitfalls of the current approach.

Keywords: Cultural studies, curriculum design, post/anti-disciplinarity, post-theory, multimodal performance, education in Tunisia.

Introduction

A reform-oriented evaluation of the content and methods currently used in the teaching of the Cultural Studies courses in Tunisian universities can be justified under a number of considerations. In addition to the concerns that are persistently raised by the instructors involved as to the quality and scope of the course content, questions regarding methodology have been left outrageously unanswered on account of the objectives of the reform to be implemented by the educational authorities in the near future. A brief discussion of the objectives of the reform plan (République Tunisienne Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique & Commission Nationale de la Réforme de l'Enseignement Supérieur, 2015) that has been recently proposed commands a few conclusions with regard to a set of major problems which will predictably flaw the policies projected to be designed in light of the findings thereof to address the weaknesses and deficiencies of the current Cultural Studies program. Acquaintance with the problems observed in class by a significant number of instructors will eventually provide

* University of Kairouan, Tunisia
E-mail: sammy1n@yahoo.com

practical insights into the areas to be discussed in this critique and a theoretical framework for the proposition of possible solutions.

1. Postdisciplinarity and Academic Survival

One should be teaching what one knows best. But what if an educator is assigned to teach material that falls outside his/her comfort zone? No one will then probably appreciate better than him/her the effort, time and energy that they will have to invest in reconfiguring their intellectual capabilities and potentials so that the quality of their teaching meets the standards of the institution. In an ideal situation where one teaches what they *think* they are best at, such an effort, time and energy would be spent on expanding their knowledge of the subject and the field of study as a whole, improving their teaching techniques and pedagogy to deliver quality instruction, and going beyond the mere reproduction of the knowledge they acquired over the years and into the realm of production and creativity. The practice of institutional specialization in research and teaching for over half a century has, in fact, amounted to a constant atomization of knowledge and a ceaseless disfiguring of the learning landscape of generations of students. In a not so ideal situation, however, efficient survival strategies are required of those instructors who refuse to be alienated by the coercive dictates of disciplinarization. For it is not so much a question of mastering what an instructor knows anymore as it is essentially about how far beyond the borders of their specialty they can reach, creating in the process of this crossing of borders countless "comfort zones."

2. Cultural Studies and Post-Theory

It is obvious that the subject matter of what we identify today as the course Cultural Studies is anything but what it used to be around the time when Richard Hoggart used the term to describe the research interests of the newly founded Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Corner, 1991). The discipline that was initially associated with the works of Marxist theorists Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams and their colleagues at CCCS (Dworkin, 1997), and which were focused on the full range of relationships between social class and culture and the problems of agency and structure, has since the late 1980s encroached upon fields as diverse as literary criticism, feminist studies, ethnic studies, psychoanalysis, media and communication studies, translation theories, and cinema and film studies. The critique of cultural hegemony and the reproduction of the power structure, the two theoretical mainstays of early Cultural Studies deriving respectively from Antonio Gramsci's philosophy and the cultural criticism of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, has shifted into an investigation of the ways by which consumers become privileged sites of cultural production by generating new meanings for consumption behaviors. Attempting to determine the essence and scope of Cultural Studies, cultural critic Gilbert B. Rodman (2015) has argued that it can in fact be quite difficult to describe with precision the task of the practitioners in the field of Cultural Studies as "a broad range of people and institutions [...] continue to misappropriate, misuse, and misunderstand the label" (p.35). Rodman

explains that the reason for the difficulty with a conclusive definition of Cultural Studies lies with the broad spectrum of issues it attempts to address, as

> [it] must embrace the situated complexity of whatever phenomena it chooses to examine and expand its own vision of its thought and practice accordingly. It is a task that recognizes that even those phenomena that appear to be transparent, simple, and well-bounded are inevitably stitched into a broad and tangled web of relations [...] and that a truly broad and deep understanding of those phenomena will attempt to bring as many of those multiple relations as possible into focus. (Rodman, 2015, p.55)

The complex theoretical strategies used by the professional practitioners of the field, or who Jeffrey Williams calls post-theorists, have recently employed new modes of interrogation to explore, disrupt, and reconstruct the pedagogy of teaching cultural phenomena (Di Leo & Moraru, 1997, p.238). The new generation of post-theory academics seeks to do "things with theory instead of doing theory per se" as the post-theoretical perspective is expected to allow for a metaprofessional, critical reflection on the pedagogy of Cultural Studies by making possible the study of the contextual framework within which classical narratives have been developed in relation to classroom practices (Di Leo and Moraru, 1997, p.238). In the view of some leading educationalists, such as Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994), the connections that students are encouraged to create in the classroom between their personal experiences and issues in the wider world involves them in the production of "intertextual and multimodal performances" that question how "schools, teachers and classrooms deal with the hybrid culture and gender identities produced by and experienced in postmodern conditions." Students' ability to produce academically meaningful representations of culturally significant experiences will, therefore, determine the dependability of pedagogic performance in the Cultural Studies classroom.

3. Problems of the Current Cultural Studies Curriculum

The extent to which this performative / pedagogic standard is being met in Tunisian universities should be measured with scientific precision, so as to bring the content of the course to bear on the aims and rationales of the current reform plan. More to the point, the effectiveness and validity of the reform will depend in large part on its ability to provide solutions to a number of problems that may be formulated in the following major statements: (1) the lack of a clear vision about the general objectives of the course in relation to the specific contextual circumstances that control the outcomes of the learning process, (2) the failure of the current curriculum to encourage active an involvement of both instructors and students in interdisciplinary research, and (3) the absence of reliable feedback mechanisms likely to keep instructors updated on the latest theoretical and methodological developments in the field.

In light of what has been argued regarding the pluralistic, cross-disciplinary nature of contemporary Cultural Studies and its liberalistic ambitions in regard to human culture and society, structural and formalistic readings of social formations and power relations based on interpretations of the grand humanistic theories of the late 19th

century do not make much sense anymore. Problems of structure and hegemony are today studied from the perspective of the psychological transformations experienced by individual agents who are capable of producing countless patterns of idiosyncratic styles of cultural and social behavior (Butler, 2005, p.114-15). If the recent orientation of Cultural Studies has been to "articulat[e] an understanding of culture in the interests of the liberty of individuals and groups" (During, 2005, p.42), can this course in Tunisian universities be said to promote such "interests"? In other words, do Cultural Studies programs at the undergraduate level promote any critical examination of the issues that are commensurate with the ongoing conversations about the larger topics and themes in the field of Cultural Studies? Do the analytical tools and methodological procedures used in our classrooms help students to better understand the relationships between theory and the economic and political issues at stake in contemporary society? Or shall one suspect that the "fear" of the literary fields of Cultural Studies (Spivak, 2003, p.19) has affected its position within the official curricula? Such interrogations are at the heart of any committed assessment of the current curriculum should we expect it to meet international standards in terms of content quality and didactic convenience.

4. The Strategic Reform Plan (2015-2025): Headlong into Failure

Although the "Strategic Reform Plan for Higher Education and Scientific Research – 2015/2025" promises to enhance the quality of foreign language instruction by providing the teachers involved with up-to-grade training in pedagogy and didactics (SO1.4.7), it makes barely any reference to the problems specific to the subjects taught in the tracks the designers of the plan refer to as "foreign languages." As far as feedback, faculty members were at best required to answer a questionnaire which included virtually no questions about the problems they may have experienced in class regarding the nature of the particular subject they teach. One is led, instead, to believe that what is being taught is exclusively the grammar and vocabulary of the foreign language in question, which denotes the totalizing approach of the plan to issues that definitely need rigorous consideration of the weaknesses of the current system if the goal of the reform is really to bring the quality of instruction up to international standards.

4.1. The Conceptual Displacement Problem

Granting that the culture-in-education policy and development in Tunisia are geared towards equipping students with a decent measure of historical knowledge and theoretical competence, designing learning frameworks that encourage them to appreciate the controversial character of cultural, economic, political and social issues under study may be quite essential for the fulfillment of such prospects. A clear identification of the practical terms and theoretical foundations of the course will be the hallmark of the whole learning process. You cannot ensure that your students are fully convinced by your argument that the civilization of South Africa, for example, should be studied because that country is part of the Anglophone world, or that it is rated among the most advanced economies in Africa. The same is true of the courses on American, British, Indian, Irish, and Canadian

civilizations, as the problem here is not merely taxonomical. The very content of these courses may have been misconstrued from the outset to mean respectively American, British, Indian, Irish, and Canadian *Cultural* Studies.

This "conceptual displacement" or misconstruction - to put it euphemistically - as revealed by the official undergraduate program - or course plan - represents the afore-mentioned courses as "introductions" to culture and civilization, whereas they should be defined as Cultural Studies courses proper, and not even as "civilization" courses - as in European language departments (Spivak, 2003, p.8). The reason is that the focus of such courses is by no means on the histories of the countries in question as instructors have rightly been warned. The latter are required to use a topic-based approach and are encouraged to engage students in classroom discussions, readings, and appraisals of a set of pre-selected primary resources. For example, an instructor may be assigned to teach a course in media and communication or ethnic studies, but the course will still be labeled "An Introduction to X, Y, Z Culture," whereas that is specifically one of the basic study areas of Cultural Studies. The point is that there can be a substantial difference between introductory courses and the ones that entirely focus on specific topics in Cultural Studies - available at several colleges around the world - which usually require familiarity with a wide range of theories and techniques of analysis beyond what the official program purports to offer.

Assuming that American Studies is "Cultural Studies focused on the United States" (Burgett and Hendler, 2007, p.4), that Canadian Cultural Studies is Cultural Studies focused on Canada and so on, and given the sheer variety of study areas involved in this field, the implementation of an interdisciplinary approach and methodology appears to be of critical importance for an effective teaching of the subject. However, a careful examination of the current programs leaves us guessing how the study of cultural texts in the first and second years could be possible when students are not introduced to Critical Theory in the so-called literature course until the final year of the undergraduate cycle. Knowing that the "Cultural Studies" course in the first year is essentially focused on some general definitions of concepts that are supposedly useful in the study of the cultures and civilizations of Anglophone countries ("Introduction aux concepts culturels et civilisationels"), neither this course, nor the literature courses for that matter, are likely to provide learners with the theoretical and methodological tools necessary for the study of cultural texts. It is rather putting the cart before the horse. I herein suggest that the courses based on the conceptual definitions and discussions of key concepts and issues in Cultural Studies be taught in parallel - i.e. during the first two semesters - with the introductory courses on the cultures and civilizations of the United States and the United Kingdom.

Table 1. The Civilization Courses at the Undergraduate Level

Semester	Course Title	Constitutive Elements
Semester 1	Concepts of Culture and Civilization	1- Introduction to Concepts of Culture and Civilization 2- Techniques for Analyzing Texts on Civilization

Semester 2	Concepts of Culture and Civilization	1- Introduction to Concepts of Culture and Civilization 2- Techniques for Analyzing Texts on Civilization
Semester 3	Concepts of Culture and Civilization	1- Contemporary Issue in Civilization 2- Introduction to British Culture and Civilization 3- Introduction to Anglophone Culture and Civilization
Semester 4	Concepts of Culture and Civilization	1- Introduction to American Culture and Civilization 2- Introduction to Anglophone Culture and Civilization 3- Contemporary Issue in Civilization
Semester 5	Concepts of Culture and Civilization	1- Issue in British Culture and Civilization 2- Issue in Anglophone Culture and Civilization
Semester 6	Concepts of Culture and Civilization	1- Issue in American Culture and Civilization 2- Issue in Anglophone Culture and Civilization

(Adapted and translated from French):

http://www.parcours-lmd.salima.tn/listeueetab.php?parc=ABhWFAwjAmcDKgdgBiYLOg==&etab=AGRQYQ82 (12/7/15)

However, re-sequencing the courses concerned will probably not suffice to fully integrate the critical tools and materials needed for learner proficiency into a global approach to reform which takes account of the interdisciplinary character of the field. Interdisciplinarity is a pertaining aspect of the study of cultures and societies if the former's goal is to truly "increase[e] [learners'] awareness and understanding of other peoples and their societies," and to "[help them] achieve a capacity for cognitive analysis of a foreign culture" as Byram and Esarte-Sarries (1991, p.18) seem to understand. And yet the interdisciplinary facet of the field involves political engagement insofar as reflections on otherness entail awareness of oneself and a critical evaluation of one's condition (ibid, p.18), a principle that is barely articulated in the philosophy behind the current curriculum. The "survey paradigm," which consists in introducing a large body of historical or literary material over a relatively short period of time, a subject format followed in English departments throughout the United States since the 1940s, and which is today a favorite approach in Tunisian English departments, is criticized for sacrificing what is "potentially distinctive" about Cultural Studies, namely the methodological and theoretical approaches that are part of the research traditions of the humanities (Mowitt, 1997, p.58). By virtue of such a political decision, instructors fit into two categories: victims and beneficiaries, that is those who should feel constricted by the "pedagogical limitations of an instrumentalized classroom" (ibid, p.58), and those who appreciate the "efficiency" of the approach given its expediency.

4.2. The Cobra Effect

Deciding on *what* and *how* to teach is in direct correlation with specific reform agendas in relation to the desired outcome of the whole educational process. At stake is our plan for the future of academic research in this

country, for the quality problems observed in the works produced by research students over the past few years have resulted in part from the difficulty for many of them to transgress the boundaries of the established disciplines. These problems underlie the failure of decision-makers to fulfill the promises of previous reform agendas which were challenged from the outset on the grounds that Tunisian colleges lacked the appropriate infrastructural facilities that are vital for such reforms. Both the problems and the repercussions engendered from them are clear manifestations of deep-rooted structural flaws that have qualitatively and quantitatively affected academic production at all levels of higher education, and across all literary and humanist disciplines. While the whole idea behind Cultural Studies is daring to challenge, transgress, "push against boundaries," and to use Hooks's (2008) words, "mov[e] out of one's place" (p.10), it is only legitimate to ask what reform upon reform have prepared our students for. For sacrificing what is "potentially distinctive" about Cultural Studies has added up to a net loss to academic research, a forgone opportunity for students to acquire "critical consciousness" and to negotiate "discursive borderlands" (ibid, p.10).

Presuming that it cannot be politically neutral and that, since its inception in the 1960s, it has been a privileged field of contest and struggle against hegemony and power in capitalist societies, Cultural Studies may be deemed to be capable of *subverting* and *connecting* (Hooks, 2008, p.11). By encouraging the study and critique of popular culture, it fractures and reconstructs reality as represented in the official programs and textbooks. It can, therefore, configure new modes of representation that facilitate the reinvention of social and cultural patterns and relationships. Is then an answer to the question of "displacement" or "misconstruction" be found in this account about the ability of the field to encourage the writing of new historical, cultural and political narratives that welcome and celebrate *emergence* and castigate the established systems of meaning and signification? It is an indisputable fact that the course Cultural Studies capitalizes on material from a complex matrix of disciplines, and that, therefore, it can be said to be resourceful enough to question the very legitimacy of academic hierarchy and structure. In his introduction to *A Companion to Cultural Studies,* cultural critic Miller (2006) enumerates twenty-two areas defining what Cultural Studies is, but the collection includes essays on at least thirty-five related disciplines, ranging from strictly scientific fields, such as technology studies to artistic and traditionally liberal study areas, such as fashion studies. This impressively broad array of interests lends Cultural Studies a unique position amid academic study areas as a serious alternative to canonized systems of knowledge. It follows that it is very likely that the current denial of its status as a serious academic field is not so much due to ignorance or lack of familiarity with its critical capacities as it is to a constant attempt to neutralize its "intrusiveness."

The unrelenting attempts by those whom Miller (2006) calls "mavens of the disciplines and the media" to ward off the threatening intrusions of Cultural Studies reflect a recurring concern about the inherent "incompleteness" of the humanities' academy as a whole. This "incompleteness" is felt on both the teachers' and the curriculum's side. For, as Gibson and McHoul (2006) put it,

> The motivation for interdisciplinarity in this context is, again, a recognition of incompleteness [that is] felt on the side of the teacher and a curriculum divided into disciplines. In its encounter with interests, ways of life and ethical practices outside itself, formal academic knowledge is forced into an awareness of its own status as partial, contingent, and distanced from the (literally) extramural world of a very different will to know, a very different set of 'structures of feeling.' (p.26)

The liberal and cosmopolitan nature of Cultural Studies is, in the view of influential cultural critics such as Tony Bennett and Arjun Appadurai, at the origin of the latter's "weak sense of discipline" (Gibson & McHoul, 2006, p.32). Moreover, its status of an "unconventional" discipline, lacking well-defined normative procedures and methodologies, places it in a "double bind" where "refusing a disciplinary status […] appears as a failure," while strict disciplinarization exposes it to the "partializing effects of disciplinary division[…]" – or incompleteness (Gibson & McHoul, 2006, p.32). It is doubtless inevitable that the controversy about the nature of Cultural Studies will determine the terms of the debate on the material to include in the program and how to teach it. In Tunisia, the decision was made more than a decade ago when the latest higher education reform stipulated that the course content had to be focused on aspects of particular cultures under a variety of labels and titles – course in civilization, cultural and civilization concepts, issues in culture and civilization, etc. But regardless of the ambiguity of its thematic foci, nothing in the official curriculum points to the methodological approach to be followed in text analysis. This problem arises in part out of the larger controversy discussed above about the multidisciplinary identity of the field. But it is equally the result of choices made on the basis of an imprecise description of the subject-matter of each of the afore-mentioned courses.

However, the misidentification problem should not be attributed to a mere failure to delineate the courses' goals and contents, or to vagueness in academic nomenclature. In my opinion, the terms of the issue should rather be framed within a larger discussion about the rehabilitation process which was initially geared towards enhancing the competitiveness of Tunisian higher education institutions in hopes of meeting the international accreditation standards set up by multinational funding organizations. Prior to the latest reform that was undertaken in the late 2000s, which once and for all terminated the Maîtrise system, undergraduate students had to pursue a two-year common study course leading up to another two years in a specialization track. This four-year degree cycle was not without merits because it not only allowed learners to gain access to a substantial volume of knowledge - both specialized and general - but it also encouraged instructors to adopt a practical research and teaching approach to the specific field of specialty, whether it be linguistics, literature or "civilization." At the post-graduate level, students were expected to have received a basic training in critical thinking and the research methods used in their respective disciplines. Under the current system, however, (post)graduate students are in general inadequately trained for research because either they lack the requisite knowledge to pursue research, or because they are not acquainted enough with the research techniques used in their specific fields of study, or because they are deficient

in both. To put it in short, the latest reform has caused both instructors and learners to miss out on the opportunity to take advantage of the focused knowledge of specialization and the interdisciplinarity of non-specialization.

The poor quality of postgraduate research in Cultural Studies in Tunisian universities bears testimony to student ill-preparedness, but also to a serious misconception of what the field is basically about. Many students – and unfortunately many instructors as well - will tell you it is a history course, or at best a study of Western political and economic institutions. It is not my intention here to seek excuses, but there is a good reason for this misconception. Newly hired instructors of Cultural Studies barely know about the objectives of the course except for some broad guidelines requiring them to "deal with" specific topics. Although they are encouraged to choose the issues to be "dealt with," their options are often restricted because they are expected to work in collaboration with more established colleagues who have the moral authority to make decisions which are oftentimes in favor of certain topics to the detriment of others. There is a certain inertia and a great deal of insularity among Tunisian faculty which impede free choice and diversification. Typically critical courses, such as cinema and film studies, have been omitted from the current undergraduate curriculum while most others are concentrated on literature or media studies, resulting in a "new space for the literary" which shapes how the course Cultural Studies is done. Finally, students of Cultural Studies have not been properly acquainted with statistical methodology while the vast majority of them have failed to produce original research.

Conclusion

In my opinion, part of the reason why the current Cultural Studies curricula have so far failed to promote original postgraduate research may be the fact that colleges have very little influence on curriculum design processes. Unlike in most North American and European systems of education, where colleges and universities have autonomous management styles and are allowed to determine the content of their academic programs, Tunisian colleges are required by the higher education authorities - based on the decisions made by the Sectorial Committees - to abide by a formal core curriculum. But despite its seeming cost-efficiency, very few benefits can be expected of tightly standardized curricula, especially when infrastructural facilities can at times differ significantly from one institution to another, while disparities in means and resources may even occur within the same university. Moreover, innovative pedagogies and negotiated curricula can promote progressive education and critical agency by "liberating" students from "official" knowledge forms and methodologies. Is it not the ultimate goal of the Cultural Studies program to encourage students to develop the "critical consciousness" needed for challenge and transgression? Enhancing the participation of colleges in designing curricular options and objectives in Cultural Studies can well be a solution to the current issues arising from the adoption of a national core curriculum.

American Studies, or American Civilization (as a course) - interdisciplinary: engages with history, literature, critical theory, minority studies, Cultural Studies, post/de-colonial studies and research from other disciplines -

tends to be used interchangeably with American/British Cultural Studies - extremely interdisciplinary as it draws upon a wider range of fields, such as political economy, psychoanalysis, sociology, media theory, movie theory, philosophy, ethnic studies, communication theory - on the one hand, and Critical Cultural Studies – which engages with post-structuralism, Feminism, and Marxism - on the other. There are obviously significant differences in focus between the two courses, despite the fact that they share similar critical purposes. But indubitably, the possibility of delivering material that meets international quality standards will definitely depend on our willingness and ability to determine and identify with precision the objectives and pedagogical approaches to be used for the course - no matter what title it should be given - so that we know what methodologies and theories we, as instructors, are expected to use.

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