

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences

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The Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences (CILAS) was founded in 2013 in Cairo, Egypt, with the purpose of teaching arts, humanities, and social sciences through creative pedagogical practice.¹ CILAS aims to

- invite students of all walks of life to engage with the liberal arts;
- support students in developing a wise appreciation for the complexity of the world we live in;
- introduce students to the humanities, arts, and social sciences in a context-specific way;
- host a learning environment that is conducive to critical inquiry, self-reflection, and civic engagement;
- promote intellectual, experiential, and applied modes of learning;
- advocate for the liberal arts in the region and the Global South; and
- exemplify a collective and autonomous approach to higher education.

On the World Humanities Report survey, CILAS indicated that they offer alternative spaces of education and encourage experimentation with different pedagogical approaches. They explained that they base their teachings in “Marxist, feminist, anarchist, (post-)humanist, classical, and decolonial” concepts and literatures.² Teaching is split into two semesters a year (which have incorporated online and hybrid forms in light of the COVID-19 pandemic). Courses fall under a range of topics, are transdisciplinary, and are taught by master’s and doctoral students or early career scholars. Thematic courses build on the core courses Historical Consciousness, Philosophical and Poetic Inquiry, and Ethnographic Study. The course offerings since 2013 give a clear indication of the critical nature of the courses; moreover, many of the

¹ See <http://www.ci-las.org/>.

² CILAS, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

courses defy categorization in disciplinary silos.³ In addition, CILAS offer labs for creative exploration and engaged research on different topics, such as the Translation Lab, the Media Lab, and the Pedagogy Lab in Cairo and the Research Lab in Alexandria.

One of the most striking aspects of CILAS's work, aside from the vast array of offered courses, is their approach to pedagogy and education. In the WHR survey, they reported that "in terms of pedagogy CILAS has emphasised its role as an autonomous college with an anti-credentialist commitment." They expand on their ethos further on their website, stating that

CILAS uses Discussion Based Learning (DBL) as its main learning method. DBL upholds a pedagogy of collective discovery *and* attunement rather than a pedagogy of mastery. This is to say that students and fellows discover new things together instead of having fellows feed students a master-narrative or lecture them. A pedagogy of discovery *and* attunement recognizes that the process of knowing is fundamentally socio-emotional.⁴

Recognizing the vital role of emotional intelligence and intuition in cultivating fertile grounds for the pursuit of knowledge, May Al-Dabbagh argues that "deep listening is about learning to see one another as agents of healing and nourishment and not simply competitors for the 'right answer' or best grade." Al-Dabbagh advocates for embodied reading practices, arguing that "being in their bodies as they read the text helps students to articulate a standpoint that is not a critique from nowhere but a view from a place that does something to their lives."⁵ This is a pragmatic approach to teaching, one that changes a student's

³ For example, courses range from Waste and Africa since Independence; Media, Power and Politics; On Colonialism and Post-Colonialism; Emerging Modes of Urban Governance; History of Modern Education in Egypt, 1960–2000; Anarchist Recipes: Uncovering Hidden Food Injustices; On Madness: An Inquiry into Margins and Emotions; Literary Representations of the Urban Global South; Elites in History, Society and Politics; Reading Aesthetics: Across Time and Space; We Are What We Eat: A Critical Approach to Food Consumption in Egypt; Film and Moving Image; Visions of the Arab: Between Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse; On the Art of Manliness; Archive Fever: Appropriation in Contemporary Art; My Body Is My Body; Classical Chinese Philosophies; Identity, Culture and Resistance; Physics for Poets; Social Determinants of Health; Portray: Women and Representation in the Middle East; and Broken Harmonies: Music and Philosophy in the 20th Century. I have listed the classes at length to attempt to do justice to the wide range of courses, literature, and interdisciplinarity being taught at CILAS (these are not all the courses, and they are only from the Cairo campus).

⁴ "Thematic Coursework," Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences, <http://www.ci-las.org/thematic-coursework.html> (italics in the original).

⁵ May Al-Dabbagh, *Self Tracing* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 6, 7.

way of being in the world. In this sense, CILAS's work falls within a critical pedagogical framework that moves away from experts feeding information to students. Instead, CILAS students develop organic relationships and critical thinking skills through conversation, listening, and understanding others to understand themselves. This allows for the effective use of facts and theory in and outside the classroom, at work, and in everyday life. Learning continues after the teaching stops.

CILAS affiliates forge links to the university, acknowledging their positions as academic outsiders while working to build on more formal academic instruction. It is worth noting that the scholars collaborating with these practitioners share their goals to enhance critical consciousness. CILAS does not outwardly posit replacing traditional spaces of learning as a goal, but strives to supplement, reimagine, and reenact formal higher education. This kind of collaboration allows smaller initiatives to benefit from institutional resources and demonstrate alternative ways to mobilize and engage them.

It is worth noting that other organizations and platforms surveyed for the World Humanities Report likewise offer pedagogical tools and strategies alongside their artistic or humanistic productions in order to enhance critical consciousness more generally. For example, *Ma3azef*, a music criticism online magazine, hosts a writing school. Several feminist platforms, including the Women and Memory Forum (Egypt), Knowledge Workshop (Lebanon), Ikhtiyar (Egypt), Nazra (Egypt), and the Regional Institute for Gender, Diversity, Peace and Rights (Sudan), host classes and workshops for enhancing the production of feminist theory and cultural critique. Cairo Comix, an annual comics festival in Egypt, puts together workshops led by comic artists. Alongside these organizations, CILAS offers opportunities for transgressive and transformative learning inside and outside the classroom. While more democratic access to education outside the usual college classroom is one aim, they share skills with enrolled students and teachers that formal academic spaces do not or cannot offer.

Acknowledging the hierarchies and modes of domination that run through and around classrooms, Samer Abboud argues that the classroom should be seen not as a neutral space but as one that often reproduces relations of power. He writes,

I reject the idea that the classroom and, more broadly, teaching and learning occur in “neutral” contexts. Rather, I wish to argue that teaching and learning cannot be separated from the contexts in which they occur and that the learning process

is one that relies in part on the nature of social interactions between students and faculty, as well as among students themselves.⁶

Finally, CILAS builds on common efforts to challenge systems of domination, including capitalist and imperial knowledge and thought. Efforts to decolonize the university curriculum have become more pertinent in light of the proliferation of North American university branches in the Arab region, especially in the Gulf countries. This trend renews concerns and questions around knowledge production between the Global North and the Global South. As Danya Al-Saleh and Neha Vora note, these campuses have a colonial relationship to the home campus, which dictates everything from curriculum to faculty hiring. However, they point out that “although an imperial structure and imperial knowledges underpin branch campus education, there are also ways that student and faculty efforts have succeeded in localizing these institutions and making them spaces of decolonial knowledge production and citizenship formation.”⁷ Students have been involved in protesting, critiquing, and questioning their curricula and advocating for including different and diverse literatures.

CILAS is critical in the two senses of the word. The first sense is that CILAS teaches courses based on concepts and literatures that are rooted in critique and critical thinking, and the second sense being that it is significant as an educational institution that is adhering to a critical pedagogy, offering a local counterpoint to other educational institutions. Last but not least, CILAS, similar to other organizations in this project, understands the significance of both creating and circulating knowledge in the Global South.

⁶ Samer Abboud, “Teaching the Arab World and the West . . . as an Arab in the West,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 11, no. 2 (2015): 233–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2015.1016031>.

⁷ Danya Al-Saleh and Neha Vora, *US Branch Campuses in the Gulf as Sites of Imperial and Decolonial Knowledge Production* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), 7.

Hana Shaltout graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist activism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.