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THE DIFFERENT FACES OF OPEN IN EGYPT

Maha Bali and Nadine Aboulmagd

MOOC Hype and Open Education Realities in the Global South

The sudden hype about MOOCs from 2012 has slowed down, but MOOCs live on. Although most MOOCs are in English and from the Global North (cf. Bali, 2014), there are now numerous MOOCs from different parts of the world in different languages (Bali & Sharma, 2017; Adham & Lundqvist, 2015). MOOC pedagogies and epistemologies vary across the spectrum of xMOOCs, cMOOCs, and pMOOCs (cf. Bali, 2014; Bali, Crawford, Jensen, Signorelli, & Zamora, 2015; Bonk, Lee, Reeves, & Reynolds, 2017).

Advances in educational technologies, including open education and MOOCs, mostly tend to reproduce the balance of power between Global North and Global South, with geopolitical power dynamics tending to “interfere with the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning” (Bali & Sharma, 2017, p. 27). For example, Africans are portrayed almost exclusively as the recipients rather than producers of knowledge (Asino, 2018) even when that knowledge is not relevant to local contexts (Mboa Nkoudou, 2016).

Openness in access to information has not challenged the power and hegemony of who determines which information becomes accessible: including/excluding particular content can reproduce inequalities and perpetuate dominant ideologies which further disadvantage oppressed and colonized populations (Knox, 2013). Although openness “can become a source of epistemic alienation and neocolonialism in the South” (Piron et al., 2017, quoted, translated, in Nobes, 2017, n.p.), the creation of OERs can become an opportunity for historically marginalized populations to use the Internet to amplify their voices and share their knowledge and stories, to become part of the global conversation (Arinto, Hodgkinson-Williams, King, Cartmill, & Willmers, 2017). According to Anant Agrawal, the Chief Executive of edX, many participants in their MOOCs are from the Arab world so there is, in a general sense, an awareness growing in the region about MOOCs as a concept and educational innovation, and in specific that content of these courses need to be translated and offered in Arabic (Adham & Lundqvist, 2015) and many of those developing Arabic platforms do just that; offer MOOCs by Arabs for Arabs.

While OERs are free to use, they are not free to produce (Bali & Sharma, 2017). Global South participation in the open movement requires resources such as stable electricity, strong infrastructure, affordable high bandwidth Internet, and digital literacy—and these require governments or external funding agencies to develop (Hodgkinson-Williams, 2018). Research on OER for Development (ROER4D, reported in Arinto et al., 2017), shows that many in the Global South use

online materials regardless of the licenses on them, and that the majority of OERs are in English and require translation to be used in local contexts. Moreover, few educators have the time, resources, or technical knowhow to adapt OERs: most use them as is, and as such, cannot counter the colonial and hegemonic dimension of the knowledge in them.

Openness can be viewed as multidimensional, including technical, legal, cultural, pedagogical, and financial dimensions (Hodgkinson-Williams, 2018), including MOOCs, OERs, and Open Educational Practices. MOOCs include xMOOCs which run on platforms such as Coursera, edX, Rwaq, and Edraak, and which have defined start and end points, and are offered by an institution; and their predecessors, cMOOCs, which are more participatory and run on connectivist principles where knowledge is distributed and networked amongst participants (see Aboulmagd, 2018; Bali, 2014; Conole, 2016). These two MOOC types are on a spectrum and not mutually exclusive, or descriptive of all MOOCs: dual pathway MOOCs (Crosslin, 2018) and pMOOCs (ref) exist, and MOOCs differ on many dimensions including pedagogical design (Bali, 2014), degree of openness, use of multimedia, learner interaction and collaboration, and degree of instructor versus learner centeredness (Conole, 2016).

UNESCO (2012) defines OERs as “teaching, learning and research materials in any medium, digital or otherwise, that reside in the public domain or have been released under an open license that permits no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution by others with no or limited restrictions”.

Cronin and MacLaren (2018) critique those in the field who wish to restrict definitions of open education to the creation, reuse, and adaptation of OER, and instead suggest the more expansive definition used by The Cape Town Open Education Declaration (2007, para. 4):

open education is not limited to just open educational resources. It also draws upon open technologies that facilitate collaborative, flexible learning and the open sharing of teaching practices that empower educators to benefit from the best ideas of their colleagues. It may also grow to include new approaches to assessment, accreditation and collaborative learning.

Contextualizing Open for Egypt and the Region

It is important to note that K–16 public education in Egypt is officially free, though there are hidden costs and problems with quality (e.g., literacy rates in the 70% range versus school enrollments in the 80s and 90s—see Egypt Independent, 2017; UNESCO, undated). Among literate Egyptians, a small percentage are able to learn in English. The Internet penetration in Egypt is around 44% (MCIT, 2018), whereas mobile penetration exceeds 100% (MCIT, 2018). Therefore, for many Egyptians, MOOCs are irrelevant. The Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), which consists of 22 Arab countries, is developing projects to promote open and online learning and increase the accessibility of education in the region (Jemni & Khribi, 2017).

The American University in Cairo (AUC), where the authors currently work, is a private English-language liberal arts institution, with a majority Egyptian and Arab student population. Within Egypt and the MENA region, this institution has mostly elite students. AUC features in some way in all three examples we focus on.

Open Educational Practices in Egypt: Inclusions and Exclusions

Rizk and Shaver assert that “the demand for access is . . . also the **right to participate as producers** in . . . creation, manipulation and extension” (2010, p. 6, emphasis added), but ROER4D findings suggest that:

educators and students in the Global South can be deprived of participatory parity due to the current domination of Western oriented epistemic perspectives and hegemonic English-language OER unless the

opportunity to create or, at least, localise and redistribute OER in preferred languages and from alternative epistemic stances, is grasped and recognised.

(Hodgkinson-Williams, 2018, para. 3)

The OEPs (Open Educational Practices) we discuss are only a sample of practices that address at least one of the ways openness is being practiced in Egypt. We focus particularly on initiatives both co-authors have personally been involved in which OEPs were developed to reduce challenges by:

- a. **Reusing or repurposing existing** open educational materials into local courses. The example we offer here is the integration of MITx materials at AUC.
- b. **Remixing or translating existing content** into Arabic—which Edraak has done by translating some edX MOOCs and contextualizing them for the Arab world.
- c. **Replicating or adapting existing models** into local languages and adapt them for context. Examples of this include Wikipedia Arabic. The example which we expand on here is original content on Edraak, the Arabic MOOC platform.
- d. **Achieving parity of participation:** where Global South educators are facilitators, designers, creators, or leaders of open educational experiences such as cMOOCs and Virtually Connecting.
- e. Creating local approaches to openness using local models (e.g., OpenMed project, A2K4D) which are attempts to encourage alternative epistemic stances. However, there is no space in this chapter to delve into all these worthwhile projects.

In what follows, we focus on MITx at AUC, Edraak Arabic MOOCs, and Virtually Connecting.

Reusing Open Content From Global North: Integration of MITx materials

This project was a collaboration between the Al-Ghurair Foundation for Education (AGFE), MIT's Office of Digital Learning (ODL), and two universities, AUC and the American University of Beirut (AUB). The program, entitled “Transforming Teaching and Learning in the Arab Region Through Online Learning”, included several online meetings and a three-day Design Camp MIT offered in Cairo involving face-to-face training for AUC and AUB faculty (and faculty developers) on pedagogy to support integration of MITx materials into their credit-bearing courses (Ellozy, 2017). The choice of courses to redesign was guided by AGFE's interest in STEM undergraduate education, and by finding AUC/AUB credit-bearing courses whose content and outcomes overlapped with existing MITx courses.

We (the authors) were involved in the redesign of a mathematics course at AUC, and our experience does not necessarily apply to other courses at AUC or AUB. This information is based on unpublished research reported in Bali, Awwad, and Aboulmagd (2018) on the integration of MITx materials into an AUC mathematics course. We do not delve here into details of student feedback on the course, but highlight some general points that are transferable to other contexts of North-South collaboration.

In any collaboration, who makes decisions on how the collaboration will proceed? In this case, AGFE restricted the participating universities to undergraduate STEM courses which had an MITx equivalent, but other aspects of collaboration were participatory, and both MIT and AGFE were open to different opportunities for future collaboration. While undergraduate STEM courses were not AUC's strategic priority for digital education at the time, AUC welcomed this opportunity to learn via MIT, and both faculty and faculty developers were enthusiastic about the experience. The design camp was perceived to be useful by faculty participants. For example, mathematics

professor Wafik Lotfallah said “we learned how to make things more interactive in class, correct our mistakes, [and] get reasonable expectations from the students’ side” (Ellozy, 2017, p. 2). Faculty found MIT’s approach, content, and process to teaching useful and a good model upon which to redesign their own courses, not only reusing the content into the existing course, but rethinking how they teach their own course.

One way to examine the effects and benefits of the MITx project is to view it from the lens of the 5 Rs of Openness, and question whether or not this project really does fulfill these aspirations. The 5 Rs are Retain, Reuse, Revise, Remix, and Redistribute (Wiley, 2014).

Retention, the right for users to make, own, and control copies of the content, was restricted by MITx; AUC faculty were not allowed to own the content or make copies, as all the content was uploaded on the edX platform, giving access to the faculty only to download their students’ grades, rather than the material itself. Granted, that material is readily available in the edX MOOCs; however, there wasn’t a way for faculty to add to the content in order to share ownership or autonomy, and faculty had no perpetual rights to continue using the content beyond the end date of the project. With regards to Reusing, which is the right to use the content in a wide range of ways, this was partially the case because AUC faculty were given a choice of whether to assign this content to students as an at-home online activity, or to go over them in class; however, AUC faculty could not download this content in order to reuse it in other ways. The third is Revise, which is the right to adapt, adjust, modify, or alter the content itself. This was slightly applicable as AUC faculty were allowed to remove parts of the content from the course; however, they were neither allowed to add anything to the content (technically did not have the permissions on the platform) nor change or alter parts of what was included in the course. Removal of parts was restricted to removing entire units, rather than only parts of the units. This was explained as a platform limitation; although edX is an open source platform, this rigidity seemingly imposed by the platform takes away from its potential openness. The AUC support staff were also not given administrator access on the platform in order to solve technical issues that surfaced during the semester, which were also not solved in a timely manner when reported to MITx administrators. The faculty were able to change deadlines for their student assessments, but not to modify the number of attempts allowed on quizzes, which were apparently hard-coded on the platform for each quiz. This rigidity created anxiety for AUC students. This brings us to the fourth element: Remix, which is the right to combine the original or revised content with other (open) content to create something new. The faculty’s inability to add their own content to the course in order to remix it with the MITx content further shows the rather closed nature of the resource—students had to check Blackboard for regular course content and edX Edge for MIT content, and found the MIT content less organized to navigate. The fifth and final element is Redistribute, which is the right to share copies of the original content, your revisions, or your remixes with others. This was not possible as AUC did not have any rights to the material beyond using it in class.

If open implies to give autonomy and share ownership, the way this project was framed and implemented still reinforced the idea of North to South educational borrowing, rather than an open collaborative project with both parties equally participating in the overarching goal. As Bali and Sharma (2017) posit, even though MOOC providers like Edraak are advancing in the production of knowledge in the South, there still is an imbalance of power because the MOOC models and the universities that provide these MOOCs are very Westernized and in some cases are in fact American or European universities, rather than local ones. Analyzing the previous project using the 5 Rs, we could say that the project only partially fulfilled these, and the result was not as empowering as it had potential to be, despite good intentions of all involved.

In some instances, open practices are two-faced in the sense that some aspects are indeed open, but others are quite closed. This project was about using OERs in a closed environment and without much control from the instructors on the AUC side. Many of the limitations relate to the edX platform rather than the intentions of AGFE or MITx.

Arabic Content, Western Models: Focus on Edraak

According to Anant Agrawal, the Chief Executive of edX, many participants in their MOOCs are from the Arab world so there is, in a general sense, an awareness growing in the region about MOOCs as a concept and educational innovation, an opportunity to reach more Arab learners by translating and offering MOOCs in Arabic (Adham & Lundqvist, 2015). Edraak has translated many Western MOOCs, and both Rwaq and Edraak produce MOOCs by Arabs for Arabs.

Other Western open models that have been adapted into Arabic and other languages include Wikipedia, which is available in Arabic. Content is sometimes a translation of the English version, and sometimes, importantly, differently written content from an Arab epistemic perspective (e.g., the story of the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel is told completely differently in the English Wikipedia than the Arabic Wikipedia—both versions use the same set of facts to come up with different conclusions on the interpretation of that history and who won that war). In the past, Tahrir Academy aimed to go beyond Khan Academy's broadcasting pedagogy and offer interaction between learners besides instructional video; however, this project has shut down due to legislative restrictions on funding for NGOs in Egypt (Shams El-Din & Abd El-Galil, 2015). One of the initiatives that continues to this day is MOOCs offered in Arabic, offered via several platforms.

The prominent Arabic MOOC platform we will focus on is Edraak, which was established in 2014 by the Queen Rania Foundation in Jordan. Edraak aims to put the Arab world at the forefront of educational innovation through presenting important opportunities that could play an integral role in the revolution of education and learning (Edraak, 2019). We focus on the MOOCs by Arabs for Arabs, where material is fully developed and taught in the Arabic language. Edraak is based on the open-source edX platform, and most MOOCs on the platform follow the model of brief, instructor-centric instructional videos and multiple choice quizzes for assessment. While Edraak has adapted the platform to work better with Arabic, the platform itself has limited options for assessment, making it difficult to conduct creative assessments that do not have clear-cut correct answers. The inflexibility of edX restricts developers, instructors, and designers from adapting the technology to fit diverse pedagogical values, and does not quite embody openness. One aspect Edraak has done well is to encourage instructors to use social media outside the platform for social interaction (although at first, they discouraged it) and this also has the advantage of allowing learners to continue in a learning community beyond the dates of a course and outside edX's rigid discussion forum format.

Clinnin (2014) critiques some xMOOCs for not following good pedagogical practice: “[I]f MOOCs remain ‘nonsocial media environment[s]’ then ultimately MOOCs are a massive form of educational malpractice by perpetuating teacher-focused, knowledge disseminating according to the banking model as evidenced by quizzes and instructor-produced video lectures” (p. 158). Edraak MOOCs have largely followed this banking model approach, with occasional learner interaction. Even though Edraak is giving access to education to people who don't already have access, according to their mission, they are still requiring the learners to both have high speed Internet to watch the instructional videos, solve quizzes without Internet outages, and the necessary digital literacy to learn and interact with the platform. Also, even though the aim is to provide education to learners to help with their professional development, most of the courses on Edraak are practice- and skills-oriented rather than academic so it may not offer the necessary content knowledge, or at least an insufficient diversity of choices for learners. At launch, some of Edraak's content was original Arabic content, and some was translated from edX into Arabic and adapted, but more recently, they have been relying more on original content. While doing more practice-based MOOCs (such as interviewing skills or entrepreneurship skills) may be a way for Edraak to address the need for employability in the Arab world, this may feed into a neoliberal agenda of only addressing needs of the job market, rather than potentially expanding knowledge in a more liberating manner.

If employability were a goal of Edraak's, then one important missing dimension is that Edraak does not offer credentialing beyond free certificates of attendance. Many other MOOC platforms offer opportunities to take an exam at an exam center and receive a low-cost certificate that has more weight than the free one. As Czerniewicz (2015) points out, in Global South countries, learning without credentials is often not valued by employers. It is possible that Edraak is unable to implement a feasible financial model for this kind of certification to work, or that there are logistical hurdles.

Moreover, when choosing universities to partner with, Edraak chose the elite Westernized universities and their professors (Bali & Sharma, 2017), namely the American Universities in Beirut and Cairo.

Another important angle to consider is Edraak's implementation of learning analytics in order to develop and enhance the MOOCs provided on their platform by collecting data to try and address some of the learner issues that surface. Most learning analytics data however provide little insight about matters such as engagement and actual learning (Aboulmagd, 2018). Research done about learning analytics and learner engagement about a MOOC taught on Edraak showed that for that MOOC, analytics for the instructional videos, for example, are not indicative of whether the learners watched the videos or not, since the analytics record as instances of video watching simply when a video is *visited*, rather than whether it is *watched* in part or in whole. Another issue that surfaced from this research is that the platform does not collect learning analytics from learners who engage with the videos through the Edraak mobile app (Aboulmagd, 2018), and since many in the Arab world access their learning via mobile devices, the resulting analytics are grossly inaccurate representations.

Parity of Participation in Open Educational Experiences

Most cMOOCs focus more on the process of learning than any particular hegemonic content imparted by instructor(s), where learners interact and participate to drive the direction of the MOOC—facilitator(s) have strong roles in the cMOOCs, but their roles are usually more as guides than instructors (Bali, Crawford, Jessen, Signorelli, & Zamora, 2015). Parity of participation can occur when Global South voices are heard when they participate in cMOOCs (Bali & Sharma, 2014), but even more so if they are (co)-designers or creators (e.g., see the inclusive nature of Digital Writing Month described in Bali, 2019).

Challenging Academic Gatekeeping: Virtually Connecting

Virtually Connecting is an example of an OEP that arose out of needs and interests of the Global South, but has benefitted (particularly marginal) academics elsewhere. Conferences are important sites for academic knowledge sharing yet they reproduce inequality of access (Nicolson, 2018): the costs of travel and registration are prohibitive for Global South scholars, contingent faculty, and graduate students, and others cannot travel for health, social, financial, or logistical reasons—and recently, border restrictions directed most prominently against individuals from Muslim states (Nicolson, 2018).

Virtually Connecting was co-founded by an Egyptian academic (Maha) and a Canadian Ph.D. student (Rebecca J. Hogue). VC affords marginalized and often excluded communities a voice and opportunity to “participate in a global conversation” (Arinto et al., 2017) at conferences in an equitable manner. VC invites virtual participants into hallway conversations with onsite participants and speakers via web-based video conferencing. These are not conference presentations and broadcasts—but rather informal, reciprocal hallway-type conversations. These conversations are livestreamed and recorded for those who are unable to participate live.

VC is neither OER nor MOOC, but a connected and connectivist open online volunteer movement (Bali, Caines, DeWaard, & Hogue, 2016) which fulfills DeRosa and Jhangiani's (2017)

understanding of open pedagogy as learner-centered, democratic, and facilitating human communication and collaboration among diverse people from around the globe—and being motivated by a desire to promote social justice. Koseoglu and Bozkurt (2019) mention VC as an informal hybrid space for “enhancing pedagogic and narrative capacities . . . as it opens up a space of dialogue that is independent, inclusive, and organically developed” (p. 169).

Beckingham (2018) refers to how VC founders eventually became an “interconnected community and developed a team of volunteers across the globe” (p. 164) and how the variety of modes of participation (from being in the conversation onsite or virtually, to watching live, to watching the recording) makes it an inclusive space for people who are still unsure how deeply they are willing to participate. We would add that this also enables people of varying time zones and bandwidth to benefit.

Although English-language fluency is still needed for such a global community, we have recently been clarifying languages our volunteers speak and have spontaneously conducted some sessions in multiple languages, and also planned sessions in German and Portuguese. There is potential to grow beyond English—but of course, most international conferences are in English, especially those related to educational technology. A notable exception is eLearning Africa, which offers simultaneous translations across English, French, and Arabic, addressing the majority languages of the region.

Also, even though reasonably good bandwidth and digital literacies are needed, we insist on using technologies that work on low bandwidth (Google hangouts work well on 4G in Egypt, for example) and mobile (the mobile app works really well) and our volunteers work closely with participants to help them figure out the (relatively simple, once you get used to it) technology. We use Hangouts on Air (YouTube live) because it automatically livestreams and records to YouTube, without requiring the facilitator of the session to upload video later (something that takes hours on a typical Egyptian DSL home connection). However, the use of Google comes with all the risks of using Google products that collect data on users and change their mode of operation often without notifying users. Moreover, YouTube remains banned in certain countries altogether.

VC has room for improvement in becoming a more inclusive space as its volunteers aspire to, and ensuring that marginalized voices are centered and not overshadowed by powerful voices in conversations (see Bali et al., 2016; Bali et al., 2017). Nonetheless, VC is still regarded as a useful open educational practice by participants. For example (see Bali, 2018 for several), one participant whose Visa got refused three times to a conference eventually was able to participate in the event via Virtually Connecting, and later became a volunteer in the team. Graduate students have said that it helps them speak directly and informally with keynote speakers and known scholars previously inaccessible to them (Bali et al., 2016).

Discussion

The majority of existing MOOCs and OERs benefit what Andreotti (2006, p. 45) calls the “elite global professional class”, i.e., those who have English-language and digital fluency, those who have access to Internet and well-connected devices (Adham & Lundqvist, 2015). In this chapter, three examples of initiatives to make learning more open, some more successful than others, have been described.

The MITx project initially targeted an already privileged class via the American institutions in Egypt and Lebanon. Even with good intentions to support good pedagogical use of their material, the project implementation did not challenge global power dynamics. In the end, we consider it an incomplete approach to openness.

Models like Edraak overcome the English-language fluency barrier, but continue to benefit the mostly educated, digitally literate class who have access to well-connected devices (because

their content is video-centric), and are therefore already privileged in some way. They may be able to reach learners who are less mobile, whether due to physical disabilities or women with family responsibilities or restrictions, but they do not offer those learners credentials. Nor do these models adapt substantially in ways that better address the Arab learner or provide a more locally or contextually relevant education. However, it still fills an important gap of offering Arabic-language educational content.

Virtually Connecting still requires, for the most part, English-language fluency, reasonably high bandwidth, and digital literacy; however, its main target are academics, and within that already elite class, academics who are otherwise marginalized are able to benefit: those from emerging economies, contingent faculty, graduate students, parents with young children, people with health issues and disabilities, and those who come up against visa restrictions. Also, the main advantage here is in the two-way reciprocal exchange of knowledge between those privileged enough to be at conferences and those who are perpetually excluded from such experiences—there is parity of participation. Virtually Connecting's main benefit here is in the dialogical nature of the connection and flow of knowledge in both directions in an equitable manner.

Conclusion

If we were to understand open education from the metaphor of seats at tables, then the typical model of inviting others to use what has been created and openly available or openly licensed is simply to ask someone to join an existing table with rules already set and inflexible. It is therefore not truly open or inclusive as it does not take into account the difference in that new member's context and resources that would require changes in order to have equitable experiences and outcomes. It also does not account for whether one's table meets the needs of that new member at all.

Inviting a person to replicate and adapt a table in their own way is one step better in that they have an opportunity to recreate it differently and not just to translate its language. However, if the tools available remain those initially created, their constraints and their model may make it difficult for the adapters to innovate in ways that better benefit their local context. This is the case for Edraak that provides Arabic-language MOOCs, but reproduces many of the disadvantages of xMOOCs, partly due to the rigidity of the edX platform that promotes teacher-centered learning and assessment.

What is needed is parity of participation in creating the table and setting its rules. At first glance, VC may appear as offering an inferior seat at an existing table. However, on closer inspection, it is the creation of a completely new hybrid table and forcing it into a previously exclusively face-to-face space. It creates reciprocal conversations that not only allow marginalized remote participants to learn from conference attendees, but also vice versa: attendees listen to and learn from virtual participants, and their voices then get heard in a space from which they were previously entirely excluded. While Virtually Connecting cannot solve all problems for all people, its creators were marginal in some way (a Global South mother partnering with a graduate student) and many volunteers are marginal in other ways that limit their conference participation—and VC is a process developed by those who will benefit from it, not by a dominant group gifting it to them.

For MOOCs and open education to be truly empowering for people in countries like Egypt, they need to be reimagined in a participatory manner, where those from local contexts are able to define what they consider to be pressing challenges and imagine their own solutions, using their own epistemologies and content and processes, explicitly remaining aware of existing models from the North, but also striving not to allow hegemony of Western knowledge and technologies. Such solutions may not be straightforward, they may indeed not be technological . . . and they may or may not be open.



Maha Bali is Associate Professor of Practice at the Center for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo where she has been a faculty developer since 2003. She holds a PhD in Education from the University of Sheffield and teaches digital literacies and intercultural learning to undergraduate students. She is on the editorial boards of *Teaching in Higher Education*; *Learning Media, and Technology*; the Online Learning Journal; *Hybrid Pedagogy*, and the *Journal of Pedagogic Development*. Dr Bali is the co-founder of Virtually Connecting. She writes regularly for Prof Hacker and her own blog at <http://blog.mahabali.me>.



Nadine Aboulmagd is Senior Instructional Designer at the Center for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo, where she supports faculty in designing their courses (i.e., online, face-to-face, blended, and MOOCs), designing engaging learning experiences, integrating technology in their classrooms, and developing course content. Aboulmagd has a Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership with a concentration in higher education from the Graduate School of Education (GSE) at AUC and is a member of Virtually Connecting, holding the role of Middle East and Africa Lead Buddy. Her main areas of research include massive open online courses (MOOCs), online and blended learning, learner engagement, adult learning, instructional design, educational technology, and faculty development.

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