Changing Pedagogies: Dar al-'Ulum and the Impact of Social Scientific Thought in Egypt in the Interwar Period

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Abstract: This paper argues that Egyptian civil schools, such as Dar al-'Ulum, were actively sought out by students for their new approaches to teaching and learning. It first highlights the perceived need for additional pedagogical training for teachers in Egyptian primary and secondary schools, which was the rationale for Dar al-'Ulum's founding in 1872. It then argues that pedagogical problems at al-Azhar were not only a target of education reform, but also a source of dissatisfaction among the students who left al-Azhar for government schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It concludes with a brief discussion of how complaints about pedagogy connect to wider shifts in the type of knowledge and knowledge transmission valued by Egyptian state and society in the interwar period.

Keywords: Dar al-'Ulum, Dar al-Ulum, pedagogy, education, knowledge, knowledge transmission, social science, teacher training, Egypt, twentieth century

Pedagogy is a frequent topic in the memoirs of graduates of Dar al-'Ulum. Lack of effective teaching and evaluation at al-Azhar – which most initially attended – is a common complaint, while many praise the effectiveness and efficiency of their instructors at Dar al-'Ulum and Madrasat al-Qada. Pedagogy is therefore an interesting topic through which an exploration of graduate's views on the differences between al-Azhar and newer educational institutions can begin.

This paper is based on preliminary research for my dissertation examining the thought of the students and teachers of the Dar al-'Ulum teacher training college in the early twentieth-century. The work as a whole aims to be a social history of an interesting group of intellectuals, with a particular focus on their changing ideas about society.

One of the major questions that I ask in my dissertation is why so many shaykhs wanted to leave al-Azhar for Dar al-'Ulum. Previous authors have left this question mostly unanswered, implying that students were attracted to the school only because of increased opportunities for further study and jobs. The memoirs of many graduates, however, paint a much more complex picture, with discussions of pedagogy, dress and knowledge frequently appearing in comparisons of the two schools.

This paper first highlights the perceived need for additional pedagogical training for teachers in primary and secondary schools (the context in which Dar al-'Ulum was founded), then argues that pedagogical problems at al-Azhar were also a source of discontent among many of the shaykhs who left for government schools, and concludes with a brief discussion of how complaints about pedagogy connect to other issues that frequently appear in my texts. I strongly suspect that my subject's discussions of pedagogy are related to larger ideological shifts in social thought, and my end goal of putting these discussions into this larger context is one of the major reasons I am eager to attend this conference.

For the purposes of this paper, I have found it useful to look more generally at individuals who left al-Azhar to attend a number of government schools (not only Dar al-'Ulum but also Madrasat al-Qada and Cairo University), though I will only be able to discuss in depth a handful of examples here.

Pedagogy and Egypt's New Government Schools

Improving quality of teaching was one of the major reasons for founding Dar al-'Ulum and similar government schools. The goal of Dr al-'Ulum and the subsequent teacher training colleges was not only to transmit particular bodies of knowledge but also to instruct students in appropriate methods through which they could pass on this knowledge to others.

In the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, the needs and goals of the Egyptian educational system changed significantly. Khedive Isma'il aimed to reinstate and expand upon the educational innovation Muhammad Ali by reinstating the Ministry of Schools, revamping the government's system of higher education system and (most importantly) vastly expanding the primary and secondary education system.

The new institutions of higher education founded during the reigns of Muhammad Ali and Ismail had a very different goal from al-Azhar and similar religious institutions: instead of gaining knowledge for its own sake, they aimed to produce individuals who were highly trained in a single profession. Their courses focused on acquiring deep knowledge in a narrower area, and were (theoretically) much shorter: students graduated with diplomas in two to five years instead of the al-Azhar minimum of twelve before one could sit for the Alimiyya exam.

However, as had been a problem previously, Egypt's school system was not producing enough qualified graduates to fill the places in these higher schools, despite Ismail's efforts to vastly expand government primary and secondary schooling.

Better teachers were necessary to effectively expand Egyptian primary and secondary education and meet the country's need for individuals trained in the military, medical and administrative professions. While teachers trained in the religious school system had long been the mainstay of kuttabs (primary schools) throughout Egypt, many of these invidiuals were neither highly qualified as either teachers or scholars.

Kuttabs themselves generally emphasized repetition and memorization instead of understanding and analysis, which is the emphasis of much 'modern' education. While students who made it to higher education at al-Azhar or other institutions did

engage with texts on a much higher level, their formal training was in religious subjects only and did not cover pedagogical techniques. As will be elaborated further below, many of al-Azhar's lecturers were not talented teachers and did not provide a good model which students could apply to their future teaching efforts. Furthermore, it is many of al-Azhar's best students (and teachers) obtained positions as Azhar instructors, judges, religious officials or 'alims and therefore did not necessarily enter the kuttab system as teachers.

While attempts were made throughout this period to reform al-Azhar education (and by extension kuttab teaching) in various ways, most notably by Muhammad 'Abduh in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, change moved slowly and was more successful at standardizing courses, exams and degrees than addressing problematic pedagogical techniques.

Dar al-'Ulum was founded in this context of educational reform with the goal of producing desperately-needed well-qualified Arabic teachers for the new government primary and secondary schools.

Dar al-'Ulum initially came into being as a lecture series in the summer of 1871 in the Dar al-'Ulum lecture theatre of the Darb al-Jamamiz Palace. Ali Pasha Mubarak – then Education Minister – intended these lectures for education ministry employees, students at the higher government schools and ten shaykhs selected from al-Azhar and paid a stipend to attend the lectures on Islamic subjects with the idea that they would then be eligible to teach in government schools – he apparently thought that shaykhs would appreciate the opportunity offered to lecture attendees to teach Arabic in government schools. In 1872, Dar al-'Ulum opened as a school with an academic program leading to a certificate in potentially as little as 2 years (though most of the initial students took over 5 years).

As a school, Dar al-'Ulum connected the hitherto completely separate 'religious' and 'government' educational tracks, allowing students (many of them poor) with a religious education access to a degree from a government school. Aroian argues that the school was the first attempt to create a bridge between these two systems.

Dar al-'Ulum specifically addressed the lack of pedagogical training by instituting classes in pedagogy. Pedagogy classes were first added to the syllabus in 1887 and gradually increased to take up a higher percentage of student's overall class time. Preliminary research in memoirs shows that many of the teachers (but by no means all) taught with concern for student understanding, perhaps because of training abroad or in previous government schools. Student's proficiency was assessed regularly with examinations, and pressure was put upon them to continue making steady progress towards the final examinations.

Dar al-'Ulum's early years were not without difficulties, however. The continually had trouble getting enough students who met their stringent entry criteria – requiring significant knowledge of both religious and non-religious subjects – and once in the school, not all students succeeded in their studies. (For instance, the degree was initially supposed to be completed in two years instead of the later five, but only two out of the initial 32 students sat exams after only two years of study).

Linking Pedagogical Concerns and Departure from al-Azhar

Quality of teaching was also a source of significant discussion among those shaykhs who left al-Azhar to attend new government institutions.

Previous works on Dar al-'Ulum by Lois Aroian and Chris Eccel discuss the differences in teaching style and approach between al-Azhar and the new schools at an institutional level, yet the perspectives of the individuals who taught and learned in these institutions – perspectives present in their memoirs – are largely missing. Aroian in particular describes how and in what ways the shaykhs studied pedagogy, but does not explore what they thought of the teaching methods used in the school, nor why they found them attractive.

A classic critique of education of al-Azhar is found in Taha Hussein's memoir al-Ayyam (The Days) and echoed in Ahmad Amin's Hiyati (My Life). While the contents of these works are undoubtedly very familiar to those in this room, they thoroughly address most of the pedagogical themes that reoccur in works by his contemporaries and are therefore an excellent starting point around which discussion of other critiques can be structured.

Hussein entered al-Azhar at age thirteen (which must have been around 1902) after studying religious topics in his home village, but drifted away from it after the new Egyptian University was opened in 1908 (which I believe was the only major new school open to a blind person). Amin grew up in Cairo and moved from his neighborhood kuttab to a local government primary school (the Umm 'Abbas School) and then to al-Azhar at age 14. His desire to enter the Dar al-'Ulum was thwarted by his poor vision, but his excellent exam results (and less than satisfactory entrance pool) secured him a spot in the first upper section of the Madrasat al-Qada in 1907.

The second book of al-Ayyam – given the title The Stream of Days by translator Hilary Wayment – vividly describes the quest of a young man to obtain 'knowledge'. Hussein states repeatedly his annoyance with the teaching style at al-Azhar: while he generally clearly understood the texts and traditions that the shaykhs used as their starting point, he was annoyed by both their lengthy recounting of sources and transmitters and their "tedious" explanations and analysis of the material.

Amin was also frustrated by al-Azhar's teaching style – which contrasted sharply with that at the Umm 'Abbas primary school he had previously attended – and, perhaps because of his time out of religious education, he had difficulty following the details of Azhar lessons. His objections do not appear to extend to the subject matter, as he enjoyed learning similar texts from his father during the breaks from al-Azhar. Apparently his father had "taste in teaching and an ability to make one understand" and was well-read in areas like "literature, history, and language", neither of which was common among Azharites. He also complained about the lack of a definitive path through the myriad of lectures at al-Azhar, even though his father (an Azhar graduate) set up a programme of study for him.

After a year or so of study at al-Azhar, Hussein despaired of learning much of anything from lectures, but instead progressed in his study because of reading and debating texts with his friends; he continued to attend out of a sense of duty and, in some cases, because he found the lectures or lecturers amusing. (A major exception to this were the literature lectures given my Shaykh Marsafi after 'Abduh's reforms

introduced classes in various 'Modern Sciences'.) He was also disgusted at the limited and unchallenging nature of the entrance exam to become a registered Azhar student.

Hussein's critical opinions of al-Azhar's style of teaching were strongly encouraged by the attitude of his older brother and his friends, who were in turn influenced by the critiques of Muhammad 'Abduh and shaykhs like Marsafi. Hussein was briefly taught by a young shaykh whose lectures did not involve reading a textbook, but instead delivering clear speeches on the essential points of a given topic; apparently the shaykh's decision to teach in this way was also due in part to the influence of Muhammad 'Abduh. Therefore, there appears to be a significant intellectual link between an older generation of reformers – that of 'Abduh and Marsafi – and the generation who came of age in the first decades of the twentieth-century.

Hussein despaired when his close companions at al-Azhar left him for modern schools – his cousin to Dar al-'Ulum and his brother to the first section of Madrasat al-Qada – a path that he could not take because of his blindness. Entrance to the Egyptian University founded in 1908 was not restricted, however, so he enrolled in lectures as he felt (according to memoirs written at the end of his life) that the knowledge that al-Azhar had to offer him was, in the end, pointless. His description of his initial impressions of classes at the Egyptian University reveals a stark contrast with the teaching style of al-Azhar. It was significantly different than anything he was familiar with up until that point. The lecturers addressed their talks to the students instead of God, they spoke on a topic in their own words instead of reading out of a book, and their lectures addressed a myriad of new and exciting topics. He was so excited about this new institution that he stayed to hear the first lecture twice.

Amin was equally excited about gaining admission to the Madrasat al-Qada, especially after failing the vision exam for Dar al-'Ulum. He was attracted to Dar al-'Ulum because it was "an orderly school with clear bounds and intelligible goals at which an enrolled student spent four years learning from the best teachers and graduated to be a teacher in the government schools." He was attracted to Madrasat al-Qada specifically because it shared this new approach to pedagogy and learning, plus it taught both traditional religious subjects such as "exegesis, Hadith, law, jurisprudence, theology" as well as "modern legal" subjects such as "modern law, the judicial system, the administration" and a "so-called modern education" with "geography, history, physics, chemistry, arithmetic, algebra and geometry."

The criticisms of Hussein and Amin are echoed in Chris Eccel's extended account of al-Azhar reform in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When discussing Dar al-'Ulum's problems (in 1920!) with getting applicants with strong skills in Arabic, writing and religious topics, Eccel paints a negative picture of education at al-Azhar: shaykhs who were barely literate themselves teaching students in a system that did not allow sufficient time for questions or additional explanation or regular checks in student understanding, and students memorizing texts that the did not understand, attending classes for as much as two years without understanding much, and occasionally even passing the final exams with little or no ability to read or write. Elsewhere, he criticises the almost complete lack of registration procedures and examinations, despite the fact that these procedures did – at least officially – exist.

Eccel's critique seems at times too forceful and memoirs like those of Taha Hussein and Ahmad Amin can help us re-center our assessment of al-Azhar's system. As noted above, Amin does criticize the lack of set program of study and Hussein complains about constantly switching from one lesson circle to another; however, both Hussein's and Amin's accounts indicate that there was a generally accepted path through the various courses offered at al-Azhar. While al-Azhar's pedagogical style undoubtedly failed many of its more mediocre students (many of whom, as noted above, were fed back into the kuttab system), individuals like Amin, Hussein and their friends managed to leave with highly-developed reading and writing skills and significant religious knowledge despite their complaints.

It is also important to note that condemnation of al-Azhar's overall organization was not universal, even among those who left for government schools. At a relatively early age, Shawqi Dayf chose to leave the religious education path and attend the Dar al-'Ulum preparatory school because he felt it would be a better preparation for a literary career. However, in his memoir, he praises at length the program available to non-registered students at al-Azhar. They could attend public lectures, sit the final exam whenever they felt ready (and as many times as they wanted), and – most importantly – choose their lectures according to the topic and lecturer that they preferred most. He notes that while Egyptian higher schools and universities have by and large removed both the element of choice and the ability of students (as consumers of education) to vote with their feet when presented with unsatisfactory lecture topics or deliveries, many American and European universities have adopted this model wholeheartedly. Even Hussein – who was otherwise frustrated with flitting between various lectures – expresses nostalgia for the relaxed way in which classes resumed after vacations when he first arrived at al-Azhar.

To conclude, pedagogical standards were not only a target of education reform, but also a source of dissatisfaction among the students who left al-Azhar for government schools. With respect to complaints and comments about teaching style, course structure, and provisions for assessment, the writing of Hussein, Amin and Dayf represent only the tip of the iceberg; there are numerous other relevant examples that I do not have the space to discuss here.

Pedagogical Concerns and Larger Shifts in Social and Social Scientific Thought

I would like to suggest, based on this preliminary investigation, that the main problem with al-Azhar in the minds of its former students (and perhaps also scholars such as Eccel who approach the topic from the perspective of education reform) is that the type of knowledge it championed and the ways in which it transmitted this knowledge were not what they – or the Egyptian state – valued.

If this is the case, then complaints about pedagogy are intimately related to larger preferences and shifts in ideas about knowledge and education, ideas that must be considered when discussing why would-be shaykhs left al-Azhar for the government's higher schools.

Practical concerns – such as what degree would be most likely to yield a job – were of course a motivating factor in the decision of shaykhs to leave al-Azhar or even to view the education offered by government schools in more a positive light. As

mentioned above, Shawqi Dayf decided that leaving al-Azhar and entering Dar al-'Ulum's preparatory school would better prepare him for a career in literature, and Taha Husayn's brother and cousin left for Madrasat al-Qada and Dar al-'Ulum, respectively, while he joined Cairo University at the earliest possible moment. Dar al-'Ulum and similar institutions also featured strongly in changing family strategies, with families often 'hedging their bets' about what path would benefit the family in the long run. For instance, Ahmad Amin's father was torn about where to send Amin to study. Sending Amin's older brother to al-Azhar was an easy decision, as his intellectual potential was not as great, but his father consulted many friends about where to send Amin. This apparently did not help much, as their advice was split; Amin ended up studying in both systems. Amin's younger brother – another bright light – ended up attending the high school section of Madrasat al-Qada until his death at sixteen. The Damascene family in Commin's Islamic Reform hedges their bets in a similar way, both regarding education and ideology: while the father and older son both trained to be traditional 'alims, a younger son attended an Ottoman training school and became an effendi; also the older son adheres to Salafi ideology group and wins over the father late in his life. In an uncertain and changing educational climate, many families with learned backgrounds were confronted with difficult choices about which educational options would deliver maximum benefit in the long run.

More interesting, however, from the perspective of my study of personal accounts, is the link between the switch out of al-Azhar and changing valuations of different types of knowledge and ways of transmitting knowledge. My ideas on this topic are not yet organized enough to present as a definitive argument, but I am very interested in considering further the developments presented at this conference, and specifically how what I see in my sources fits into the larger picture painted by our collective corpus of papers.

To conclude, Dar al-'Ulum and similar government schools were not only places where new pedagogical techniques were taught to future teachers, but also sought out by many for their new approachs to teaching and learning. ith any luck, this brief presentation has demonstrated the insight that a consideration of individual's ideas and experiences can bring to the study of institutions like al-Azhar and Dar al-'Ulum.

Thank you for your attention.