

“You Are the Generator  
of Your Society”:  
Unlearning Learned Helplessness

Lynn Rose, Center for Gender and Development Studies

American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

# Learned Helplessness

- Internal: I am wired wrong to learn math
- Stable: I am wired wrong to learn math and I can't be rewired
- Global: I am wired wrong to learn math...and probably most subjects...and I might as well not even try.

The term “learned helplessness” was coined in 1965 by Martin Seligman. A result of experiments in classical conditioning, which is behavior learned by association of one thing with another, learned helplessness is a failure to try to leave a negative situation because one has learned that one’s attempts will be useless. Internalized learned helplessness is expressed for example in “I am wired wrong to learn math” (rather than blaming it on a bad teacher or a bad textbook). Stable learned helplessness refers to the belief that the characteristic flaw is permanent—I am wired wrong and I can’t be rewired.

Of these three varieties, the global is the most dangerous. I am wired wrong to learn math...and probably most subjects...and I might as well not even try.

Females seem to be physiologically more prone to learned helplessness, and teachers can unintentionally promote learned helplessness whenever we allow girls or women in our classroom to remain passive, for example providing answers or solutions for female students while insisting that male students find their own way, thus developing their confidence and self-reliance.

Other vulnerable people are those at risk for mental illness, and people in generational poverty. (By the way, all my references are in the full paper). No one, however, is immune—rich or poor, male or female—and perhaps in this time of unfathomable cruelty, ecological disasters, and political incompetence across the globe, we are all vulnerable to learned helplessness. We in the Gender Center are especially concerned with this phenomenon.

# Center for Gender & Development Studies



Established in 2015 as a hub of knowledge and ideas about gender equity, the Center for Gender and Development Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani (AUIS) combines scholarship and teaching with community development. We aim to ensure that academic initiatives lead to normative change and improved gender relations, with the ultimate goal of gender equity. As a vector of social change in Iraqi and Kurdish societies and the MENA region, we seek to support women in their struggle to regain the voice and agency that belongs to them and to support women and men working together to achieve a healthy society. This is our whole crew, the four core members and the student volunteers



# CGDS Training



# Mr. Feminist Campaign 2017

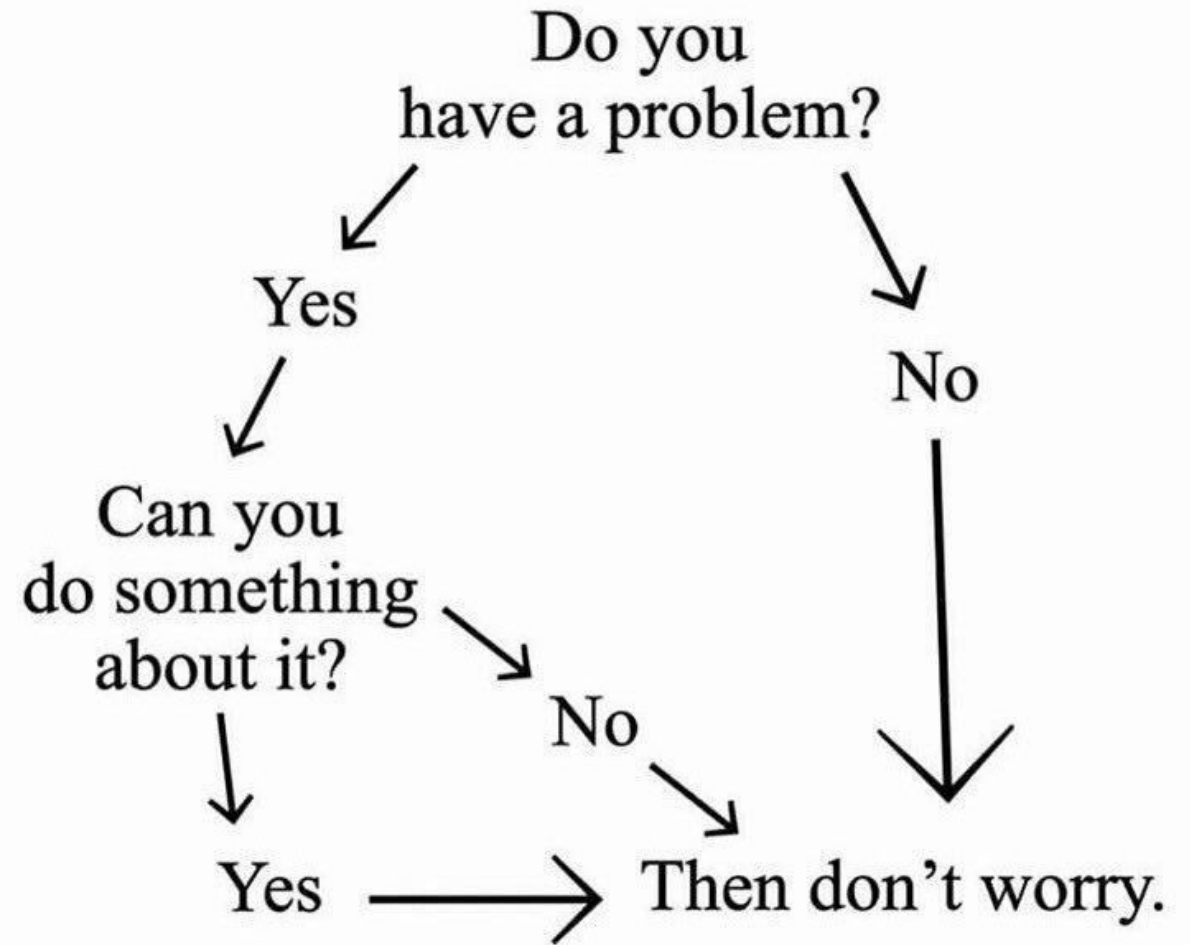


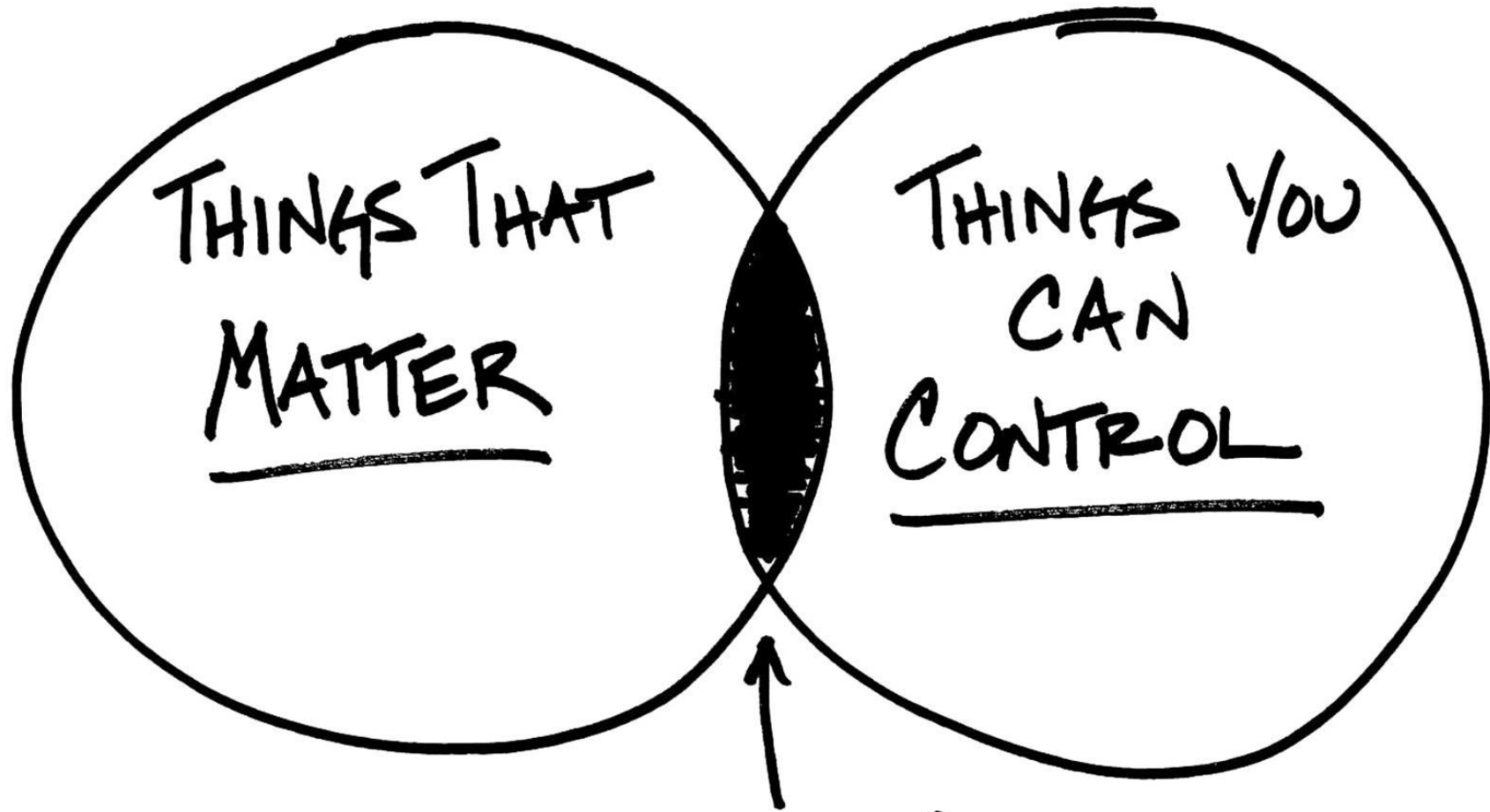
We believe that men and women must work together for anything to change, These photos are part of our Mr. Feminist campaign (over 60 men participated) from the 2017 Sixteen Days of Activism





The solution to learned helplessness appears simple enough. From the ancient philosophy of Stoicism –boiled down to its essence in this diagram--to contemporary self-help movements, the answer lies in a measure of acceptance of the way the world is, while changing the things that one can, along with a healthy dose of self-worth and dignity. Yesterday's talk by Tamilla Mammadova referred to the ANDROGOGICAL APPROACH as a way to break student's dependence on teachers—as a way of countering student immaturity by releasing control on them.





WHAT YOU SHOULD FOCUS ON



It turns out that students' peers, more than their parents or teachers, have the most effect on unlearning learned helplessness. In an effort to draw on the potential of peers to unlearn and prevent learned helplessness, and to address the multitude of humanitarian issues in our area, we founded The Action Group (TAG) in 2015. Individuals, in fact, *are* agents of change. (Here we see TAG volunteers at one of our many refugee camps.) At the TAG launch event the Kurdish singer Bahjad Yahya had these important words for the new members:

“We are young or students. Do we have the ability to change those difficulties that we face? For sure, if we see all of humanity. If we just remove 500 people from the history of humanity, we would not have the civilization we now have. Honestly, you are the generator of your society.”

While TAG thrives, with over 100 members, we wanted to provide this opportunity of community-building on a larger and more formal scale. So, we developed service-learning courses.



# What is Service Learning?

Service-learning exists in three basic environments: the local community, the regional community, and the global community. More than discrete volunteer work, service-learning is a dynamic process of interchange between academic and applied knowledge. In general, the project is conceived in the classroom, developed in collaboration with the outside community (local, regional, or global), carried out in dialogue with both environments (i.e., campus and larger community), and processed, evaluated, and archived as both an academic and community experience.

# Service-Learning Course 1: “Kurdish Regional Cultural Heritage”



“Service-Learning: Regional Cultural Heritage” takes students to the Zheen Center for Journalistic Heritage, which houses the most important collection of documents about Kurdish history and heritage in the country and region. The collection includes an enormous variety of sources. Because of lack of funding, the archive is in desperate need of volunteers to do the work of collation, digitizing, preservation, recording, and translation. Students from AUIS, beyond doing a good deed and enhancing their résumés, find that such activity is a real contribution to the local, regional, and global community.



Restoring and organizing the material culture is taking part in the cultural heritage. Doing so in a systematic, academic, and intellectually reflective way is service-learning at its best. After seeing three magnificent museums in Baku yesterday, I don't think that the archival need is quite equivalent here. Still, I am sure there are opportunities for service—if the rural areas of Azerbaijan, it seems from what I heard here yesterday from Alan DeYoung, are equivalent to those of Kentucky.



# Service Learning Course 2: “Social Justice in Theory and Practice”

1. Theoretical readings in class.
2. Focused research project where students collect data about a particular issue that they want to explore.
3. After identifying the problem students then engage in community based service activities related to their research topic.
4. As students engage in the field they write introspective papers to reflect on their own social position in relations to others and to identify obstacles faced while trying to make a difference.

“it was never a fair game with you”

I finished my primary school as the number one student. I was indeed a proud kid having my entire family behind my back and supporting me both financially and spiritually so I can study and get the best possible grade. I was not always at the top. In my 5th grade there was a girl in my class, she was smarter than me and in that year for both of the seasons, she topped my grades. I felt humiliated, so I started to study more and my family were always at my back to provide what I needed; a new book, writing implements, a new tutor, and even my own studying desk. So, I challenged her to see which one of us can get higher grade in the 6th grade. Having everything I needed I got the lead and told her “I won, because of my hard work and nothing else. You have two eyes I have two as well, it was a fair game and I’m better than you.” That year I got the grand award in my primary school.

“nothing is fair when you are over-privileged.”

For a moment in my life, I felt that how much I hurt this girl unintentionally, for a moment in life I was not a smart guy but an ignorant one.

I was stuck by David Bridges' note yesterday that the management systems of education have to be support systems, to work alongside. That reminded me that our university president literally worked alongside these students, collecting trash. He was also our first Mr Feminist., This is a strong message that the university supports the activity.

By facilitating opportunities together for our students to gain perspective about their role in society by encouraging them to work with their peers to heal and better their communities, even in small ways, we are also helping not only to unlearn but also to prevent learned helplessness by letting them see that changes can be made.

The most important change is that of agency, to realize that one is a generator of society.

# TAG volunteers cleaning Lake Dakan

