

Transcript

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Derek Bruff: [00:06] Welcome to “Leading Lines,” a podcast from Vanderbilt University. I’m your host, Derek Bruff, Director of the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching. In this podcast, we explore creative, intentional, and effective uses of technology to enhance student learning — uses that point the way to the future of educational technology in college and university settings.

[00:23] In this episode, the newest member of the Leading Lines team, Melissa Mallon, interviews Maha Bali, associate professor of the practice at the Center for Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo, Egypt.

[00:34] Maha is a full-time faculty developer, like me, and also teaches educational game design to undergraduates. She’s also incredibly active in educational technology and digital pedagogy discussions online. Seriously, I see her name everywhere.

[00:47] I’m thrilled to have her on the podcast from halfway around the world in Cairo. She and Melissa have a wide ranging conversation from faculty development to critical pedagogy to digital literacy to surveillance, social media and more.

[00:58] One note, Maha uses the acronym MOOC at one point in the interview. MOOC stands for Massive Open Online Course. Maha has been very active in MOOCs, especially those focused on educational technology.

[01:09] [music]

Melissa Mallon: [01:14] Thank you so much for joining us, Maha.

Maha Bali: [01:16] Thank you, Melissa. I'm really excited about this conversation. I'm looking forward to it.

Melissa: [01:21] Wonderful. I thought that maybe we could start off...as I mentioned to you earlier, the Leading Lines podcast focuses on educational technologies in relation to teaching and learning in higher education. I wonder if you wouldn't mind starting by just talking a little bit about your experience in this realm.

Maha: [01:41] Just generally my experience with educational technology, I'm originally a computer scientist who hated computers and left the field, only to come back again to ed tech.

[01:50] One of the reasons I left the field is that I was frustrated with computers and more interested in human beings, but when I left the field, after working in corporate for a couple of years in IT, I did a Masters of Education in e-learning.

[02:04] One of the cool things about that is that it seemed like it was combining education and computer science. I was interested in moving to education. It seemed to be combining them, but the master's I did was at the University of Sheffield in the UK, and it had a very strong human pedagogy emphasis.

[02:21] For some time after that, I did my PhD in education. It had nothing to do with technology at all. It was about critical thinking. I started to think critically about educational technology, and to get frustrated with techno-positivist discourses.

[02:37] Towards the end of my PhD, I discovered two things. I discovered the journal Hybrid Pedagogy, which takes a critical pedagogy approach to EdTech, which was like, wow, because at the time I had not seen that much before.

[02:49] I also took a MOOC called, "E-Learning and Digital Cultures MOOC." Which, again, talked about those extremely positive and extremely negative use of technology, and how neither of those was really representing reality.

[03:02] In my work, one of the things I've been doing since 2003 as a faculty developer, with different titles like Instructional Technologist and all kinds of different titles, was to support faculty to integrate technology in their teaching. And [laughs] that entailed me being positive

about it in the way I dealt with them, but I became increasingly uncomfortable with that.

[03:30] And at the same time, I'm also uncomfortable with faculty who dismiss technology in the Sherry Turkle type of discourse, that cell phones are bad, technology is bad. That's also not true, and that's not the way our students live their lives. I'm always trying to navigate somewhere in between that is contextualized by the particular...

[03:54] Not generalizing about technology in any way, but looking at each individual way that technology is used, with which students, at which point in history. You know what I mean?

Melissa: [04:04] That is one thing that I'm interested in hearing a little bit more from you. How you balance this role of being a little bit critical of EdTech in the classroom, but then also trying to encourage faculty and instructors to incorporate educational technologies. How does your own experience and background in critical pedagogy influence how you approach this?

Maha: [04:36] One of the things I'm remembering right now is that when I first got into this, part of my role was to help encourage people to use things like learning management systems, like WebCT, and things like turnitin.com for plagiarism detection. Also to teach them to use things like learning outcomes and rubrics.

[04:56] At that point in time, very early before I got into the critical pedagogy aspect, when people resisted that, we used to take it as their being lazy, or their being backward, and so on, which I think now in hindsight was a horrible attitude. One is, because a lot of times people are resistant for a reason and whether that reason seems justified to me or not is not the point.

[05:17] The point is to sort of understand their point of view about why they don't want to use it or why they want to use, and to also keep in mind that if they're using something they're not comfortable with, the students are not going to have a good experience so the idea shouldn't be about encouraging faculty to use WebCT as a goal as much as it should be about a good learning experience for students.

[05:35] If for that faculty member, for that course, using technology is not going to do that, then it's not something we should be doing. Also, Turnitin is not something that now I would defend. Learning management systems are not things that I would defend.

[05:50] What I would do now is I'm much more about trying to understand the faculty member and their philosophy, why they're doing what they're doing, and occasionally stopping them from doing something they didn't think through very well before doing it.

[06:04] You don't want them to force students to do something that would compromise something for the students. Trying to make them think about, for example, if you're going to ask them to use something like Facebook, did you keep in mind that some students aren't on Facebook or that some students have privacy concerns around Facebook?

[06:19] At the same time, for faculty where Facebook might be useful, to make them understand that they could create groups where their students don't have to be their friends to be part of the group. Things like, that you can create a separate account for your professional Facebook that's separate from your social Facebook.

[06:35] Trying to navigate all of those complexities, depending on the context for each individual instructor in class, I think makes a big difference. And also listening to students and how they feel about certain things.

[06:48] Listen to your own students, obviously, like in my own classes when I teach, but also there was one time when I was giving a workshop about using social media in the classroom.

[06:58] By coincidence, there were three students who were attending that workshop — it was a workshop for faculty — but there were three students attending it because they were doing a podcast for a journalism course.

[07:08] They were doing it as part of an assignment of theirs. Suddenly, early in the workshop, I'm like, "Hey, wait a minute, we have three students here," and we're asking questions in the workshop about what would students feel and we have three students right here.

[07:20] They became part of the workshop, and started to give us feedback. We were thinking, "Oh, should we use the same social media the students are on, or should we not go into their space?"

[07:30] And they responded about that. They told us which social media they're on, which ones they're comfortable having faculty on, and which ones they're not. Those are kinds of conversations that you should have with each one of your classes.

[07:41] I do. I did used to go into a class thinking, "This is what I'm going to do with this class." Now, I'm more about, "This is what I'm going to negotiate with my class." These are the different options. Then, we're going to choose something that works for everybody, or find ways for different people to do different things but still achieve around the same kind of learning. So there's that.

Melissa: [08:04] I like that you talk about it as a negotiation with students, because there's often...a lot of the pushback against using educational technology, social media, whatever it is in the classroom, often will feel like an all or nothing type situation.

[08:24] It's nice that you're an advocate for the student in this process, and that it doesn't have to be one specific way to deal with this. That leads me into another thing that I was curious about.

[08:39] I know that you've said that you may have some challenges for some of the questions that I ask you, which I think is really a good thing. I'm interested in hearing how you unpack some of this.

[08:54] Thinking about the student experience in higher education, you've done a lot of work with digital literacy and digital citizenship. That's something that I'm really interested in as well.

[09:07] I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about your thoughts, if you see a role or don't see a role for educational technology in building students' digital literacy skills.

Maha: [09:22] I'm at a moment in my institution where I've been talking about digital literacy for a while. It's something that should be a goal for the institution. Like we have certain learning goals related to writing and speaking and communication skills...

[09:36] We're a liberal arts institution so we have these overarching goals that we mix through our liberal arts curriculum, as well as courses. Things like critical thinking, obviously, citizenship and intercultural communication. I think digital literacy should be somewhere there, at least, in the sense that a lot of communication is digital now anyway.

[10:00] The way you framed the question in the email about educational technology playing a role, is that I've been thinking that the thing isn't about education technology playing a role

in developing digital literacy as much as developing the digital literacy is something that happens in the classroom, in the way the instructor discusses things with the students.

[10:21] It's not the technology itself that's going to build digital literacy. It's going to build your digital skills if you use it and you have to use it to build the literacies, but, for me, digital literacy is the judgment aspect, is the critical judgment that you exercise when you use, or choose not to use the technology.

[10:39] To me, that's not a thing that the technology does in and of itself. It's something that happens in human communication around, reflecting, about. It's a meta thing. For example, I'm not going to get my students to use Twitter and then they're developing their digital literacy because they're using Twitter, as much as our discussions of what Twitter is allowing them to do.

[11:06] What happens when you use a hashtag and when you don't, what happens when you get into a conversation that you weren't originally tagged on, and those kinds of things... Occasionally, I think a person could reflect on them on their own, but they're usually better reflected on in a social context.

[11:20] One of the things I'd like to try and I haven't done it before, but I got this idea from Jade Davis — and a few other people are doing it as well — which is, before we use a technology with students, to read the terms and conditions together.

[11:35] I haven't done it yet, and some terms and conditions are horrendous to read, but some of them aren't. [laughs] We'll start with ones that aren't horrendous to read. Discussing them, and just getting into that habit of, "By the way, there might be something in those terms and conditions that you don't agree with."

[11:50] Then, "What are you going to do about it? Is it going to be worth taking the risk and going ahead anyway? Is it a high risk for you, personally?"

[11:59] One of the other things is that digital literacy is very contextual in the sense that, when people talk about things like surveillance that exists in social media and they talk about corporate surveillance, surveillance capitalism — and I live in Egypt. [laughs]

[12:15] The society...like surveillance is a fact of life that isn't even something that people are

ashamed of. So that's almost like, "Yeah, you know, whatever, that's going to happen anyway." And we know that maybe we're doing nothing wrong and something will be misunderstood because some algorithm caught you.

[12:35] It's not a light thing, but it's not a shocking thing when it happens. [laughs] You know what I mean?

Melissa: [12:41] Yeah, absolutely.

Maha: [12:42] At the same time, it's very risky to have your students do something like political blogging. If I was teaching a course where this could be a risk for them, I wouldn't have them blog publicly, for example. I wouldn't want that to cause problems for them. It's too big of a risk. They could get arrested and things like that, so I wouldn't ever do it.

[13:04] This is what I always say in workshops. "What are you teaching? What are you going to ask your students to do?" Then, "Is this something they would benefit from doing publicly or is it something that they could harm themselves by doing publicly?"

[13:15] In other contexts, like if they're going to be journalists eventually, it would be stupid not to teach them about writing publicly. It is part of the learning outcomes for that discipline, you know what I mean?

[13:30] What I do believe, and I think a lot of people in my community and network online believe, and increasingly people in my office as well, locally, is that things like learning management systems and those kinds of institutional platforms do not help build digital literacy because the world is not that.

[13:51] Of course, when you work in a corporate environment, you might be using some kind of software that's imposed by the organization, but those things are just routine. You learn how to make it work and that's it. It's not a [laughs] transferable digital literacy and it's more of a compliance. Digital literacy which I don't think is a digital literacy, you know what I mean?

[14:18] There is a space where we could say that the open Web exists. Students are on social media, they are on the open Web. Therefore, using those things in an educational way, with a critical conversation in the classroom, could help develop digital literacy skills versus just

using the LMS in a blind way and just complying to, "This is where your course materials are going to be and just use it that way."

[14:46] My point in challenging that question is just that the building of digital literacy is something that happens that's about the human conversation that happens around it, and not the technology itself.

Melissa: [14:58] I think that's fantastic and I think it goes back to this idea that it's more than just the technology. That's one thing that I've been very grateful to read in your work is that you focus on, even something like you were mentioning talking about the terms and conditions for the different tools that are being used, it's a bigger issue than just learning how to use technology or engaging in Twitter conversations.

[15:34] It's how you're doing it and why you're doing it and what the purpose is there that seems to be a real focus of, especially, how you train faculty to incorporate these things. Would you say that's fair?

Maha: [15:50] Yeah. That's a good point that you brought up. The thing is not everybody is teaching a course where they feel they have time to take out of the course to have those discussions. Sometimes, you just want to get on with it.

[16:03] Some people aren't equipped to have those conversations. Hopefully, we can support them by either going in or having that conversation with them. Occasionally, we'll go into the class and have that discussion with the students. Of course, how deep you can go differs from one to the other, and how much the students absorb from what you tell them also differs.

[16:23] When I had my students blog before, I would always have a conversation about Creative Commons and copyright and that kind of thing. They would still go and both put pictures without references and pictures that are copyrighted onto their public blogs. No matter how often you say it, because the culture doesn't support it, it's not like telling them one time is going to fix it.

[16:45] It's going to take a while for them to internalize.

Melissa: [16:48] Believe me, I feel like this is a constant library conundrum is that you know there are these things that students can benefit from so greatly.

[17:01] Even something as small as using Creative Commons, images or media, or whatever in their presentations, it can be hard to get them to see beyond the immediate need of, "Here's what I need to find to accomplish my projects, and I'm not going to think beyond that."

[17:22] That critical thinking piece is definitely...

Maha: [17:24] You know what was interesting though? There was this one time where the students all plagiarized in some form or another, or committed a copyright violation on some form or the other, so I went to the next class and I completely changed what I was going to do — it's an educational game design class.

[17:39] I made a game about, "How would you feel if?" The game was, how would you feel if you took a picture, you posted it on Facebook and some other person used it in an article that they were writing? I thought that would annoy people, right? If you didn't make your picture Creative Commons and you put it up.

[17:57] Would you be OK with someone using it and not mentioning you, that it was yours or anything? Surprisingly, a lot of them actually didn't care.

[18:06] [laughter]

Maha: [18:06] These kinds of things surprise you. You think it's so obvious like, "Of course, they're going to get pissed off." Nope, a lot of them weren't. We had a discussion about that because they're like, "I don't mind. I put it on Facebook. That means anybody can use it."

[18:20] I don't know if you've had this conversation with students before, but I've heard a lot of people in different countries saying that students assume if it's public on the Web, that it's not copyrighted unless you tell them otherwise.

[18:31] Sometimes, when you teach them about Creative Commons, they think Creative Commons is restricting what you would be able to do because the default is CC0. If you put it on the Web, I can do whatever I want with it.

Melissa: [18:43] That's really interesting to me. I like that this example you have illustrates that, maybe as educators, we think that it's one thing to -- using the example of someone else's copyrighted images -- that it's one thing to plagiarize that or to reuse something

without permission.

[19:09] Then, we have this assumption that if it was us or the student work, that they wouldn't want someone to do that same thing to them, but we're such a different generation in terms of producing content. They want people to take it.

Maha: [19:29] Yeah. They were like, "I would be honored."

[19:31] [laughter]

Melissa: [19:33] Right! So how do you see the education around these issues changing as we...I don't think that this idea of mass collaboration and consumption and just pushing out information is still going to be there. It's probably only going to grow, but then do you see that the conversation with students needs to shift in a different direction?

Maha: [20:07] I do think we need to listen to them. I was, just now, listening to a Virtually Connecting session. It's on YouTube. You can find it. It's from the Digital Pedagogy Lab Institute.

[20:18] They're virtually connecting those conversations with people who are at conferences with virtual folks. They get recorded and they're on YouTube and you can watch them later.

[20:25] This one had several people who were attending the event, one of whom was a recent fresh grad from university. The conversation was around not what we're talking about now, but I think what was interesting is that the students were talking about whether you should use platforms that extract data from students and let them lose control over the data and things like that.

[20:49] Miranda, who's a recent grad, was saying that for her and many of her friends, they've already gone through a lot of the risks of social media, like catfishing, and getting credit cards stolen, and all that kind of thing. Their attitude towards these things are different than us who are of an older generation.

[21:08] When we have those conversations with them about the issues and so on, they get frustrated. Then nothing happens and in the end, they're still going to use it because they need to use it for other things. They perceive the risks differently.

[21:20] She gave the example of airport security. She said, "You can talk about the injustice of the way airport security is and how they search people and so on, but there's nothing you're going to do to change it. If you want to get from one place to another, you're going to go through airport security, so don't make me so frustrated that you make me not want to..."

[21:39] She didn't say exactly that, but I'm thinking she's saying, "Don't make me so frustrated that I don't want to travel when I would have benefited a lot more from traveling than the risk I'm taking by going through airport security."

[21:48] First of all, you need to listen to how the students feel about it. Even though they have less experience and they're less mature and all that, you just still need to trust that they are listening to what you're saying and that they actually know what they're talking about to some extent, at least.

[22:03] I think that those conversations will start to shift as younger people who view these things slightly differently than we do...We know digital literacy isn't an age necessarily thing, but they're younger in the sense that they grew up with this technology in a particular way that they're less shocked by some of the things that shock us because we didn't grow up with it.

[22:34] I personally just believe that, a lot of times, we're being so critical of something that has so much potential for empowerment that we stand in the way of people who could potentially be empowered from it.

[22:49] One of the people who talks about this, not about technology, but really nicely is Freire. Freire and Shor have a book called *Pedagogy of Liberation* where they talk about how critical pedagogy and the ideology of it is really important.

[23:01] At the same time, you need to think about the economic benefit to the oppressed. Even though you need to challenge the dominant language, the dominant views, you still need to teach it to students so that they can survive in the world while being critical of it, but still teaching them that as well.

[23:24] I think for social media and those kinds of things and as a digital literacy, they need to know all the dimensions of it and then make those decisions for themselves of whether they're going to use it or not.

[23:34] I think about something like the role of social media in the Egyptian revolution, Arab Spring, and so on. It's problematic in so many ways that we didn't realize at the time, but it's still allowed something to happen. It doesn't matter what happened afterwards, but something happened because of that.

[23:51] It allowed a lot of people to come together in ways that they couldn't have beforehand. You don't want to sort of take away that potential. A lot of us who are critiquing social media are people who have benefited so much from social media that it doesn't make sense to push students away from it completely when there's that potential and when students are probably going to be there anyways, you might as well teach them how they might use it in a more empowering way.

[24:17] For example, a lot of my students who learned to use Twitter didn't know that you could use a hashtag as an entry point into a community. They used to think hashtags are things that could say, "#I'm smiling now." [laughter]

[24:30] Rather than a #edtech where you would find information about educational technology. They usually think about following Justin Bieber, and BBC, or whatever, but they don't think about following human beings that they don't know personally, but who might have something useful for them to listen to and they are amazed when someone responds to them from somewhere else in the world.

Melissa: [24:54] I think that's an amazing thing that we can help open this world up to students, especially thinking about even just scholarship and disciplinary studies. Not even seems like 10 years ago, you would have the top tier of people and scholars and academics in a certain field.

[25:22] They seemed unreachable because you read their articles in journals and that was about the end of it. Now, you can actually tweet someone about their article. It's just so much easier to have access to, not even just in academia, but virtually any aspect of life.

[25:47] There's that ability to converse that I think is so beneficial for students and really all of us, but especially for students as they're starting to navigate the world.

Maha: [26:00] I agree completely. First of all, I think a lot of people who are on Twitter are there because they're willing to do that. A lot of people who aren't on Twitter aren't there

because they really don't want to be reached that way.

[26:12] That's fine, but when you're on Twitter, especially if you're active on Twitter, it signals that you might respond to what students sent you. Definitely, this is one of the most amazing things that Twitter is because someone doesn't have to follow you back for you to be able to converse with them. That's amazing versus Facebook, for example.

Melissa: [26:29] Should we use this moment to say that we planned this entire interview via Twitter messages?

Maha: [26:35] [Laughs] Yes, via Twitter DM. That's true. That's actually the best way to reach me, and my students figured that out pretty quickly. If we use Twitter that semester, they figured that out.

Melissa: [26:49] I do feel that the interview with you here is a great example of this. Like I said, I have admired your work for a long time. Then, when we were brainstorming people for the podcast, I said, "Hey, I've got somebody that I think would be fantastic. Let me just send her a message on Twitter and see what she says." I'm glad that you are reachable and open to those sorts of things.

Maha: [27:14] Thank you. I'm really enjoying it because I was just blogging about some of the things we're talking about right now. I couldn't finish the blog post, because it was time to talk to you. You actually helped me think through it.

Melissa: [27:24] That's good because I feel like we could keep talking for hours and hours. Maybe we can continue our conversations off the podcast at some point, but I think it's great that you have so much on your blog. Your Twitter account is a must follow so that listeners can find a little bit more about your ideas here and your thoughts.

[27:54] As we're wrapping up, is there anything else that you want to say or that you want to make sure? Anything that has jumped out at you as we've been talking today?

Maha: [28:09] Like you say, the conversation doesn't need to end. I don't know with your podcast if there's a space for people to ask questions, or if it's put on something like SoundCloud where they can put comments there?

Melissa: [28:18] It is, yes. It'll be on SoundCloud.

Maha: [28:20] Great. That will be an easy place for people to annotate if they want. Of course, they can reach out to me on Twitter or my blog or anywhere else.

Melissa: [28:26] I just want to ask one more question. That is, while we've been talking a lot about digital technologies and social media and some of those types of things, we like to ask the guests if you have a favorite analogue educational technology that you tend to use in your teaching or your work with faculty.

Maha: [28:53] I have a thing that I use with my students and in faculty development workshops. It's educational, but I wouldn't call it an educational technology. It's a toy thing that I got for my daughter, but I use it in workshops.

[29:09] It's a thing that's magnets and balls that you can build all kinds of shapes with. I think it's banned in the US because kids used to swallow the balls or something like that. I was experimenting with my daughter with which ones she'd like the most and which ones that I could use in workshops.

[29:23] One of the beautiful things about it is this tactile aspect. When a lot of what you're doing is digital, you don't get that and having an opportunity to have students to work together to build something with it...

[29:36] I use it for all kinds of different icebreaker activities. I use it in all kinds of ways of making analogues between what they end up doing and what I'm trying to talk about, which are completely different things each time.

[29:48] That's one of my favorite things that I discovered a couple of years ago. It's also very interesting how I think a lot of things that I do with my child influence my teaching in a really big way.

Melissa: [29:58] How old is she?

Maha: [30:00] She is going to be six next month, Chauba.

Melissa: [30:03] So you've got a little guinea pig at home that you can try out some of these

different things, right?

Melissa: [30:08] That is a wonderful answer. I don't know what those things are called. Little, metal...

Maha: [30:13] The particular brand, they're called Barney Mangel Magnets. I could send you a picture if you want to put that on the...

Melissa: [30:19] Yeah, we can attach it. That's perfect. That would be great. I know it's very late in Cairo, but thank you so much again for joining me today on the podcast. It's been a real pleasure to talk with you.

Maha: [30:33] Thank you so much, Melissa. I really, really enjoyed it. The interesting thing is that I said completely different things than what I was expecting to say. I was thinking through your questions, and the way you asked them really helped me think even more. Thank you for that.

[30:44] [background music]

Melissa: [30:47] I'm glad to hear it.

Derek: [30:49] That was Maha Bali, Associate Professor of the practice at the Center For Learning and Teaching at the American University in Cairo. Maha was interviewed by Melissa Mallon, one of my favorite librarians. Melissa is Director of Liaison and Instruction Services at the Vanderbilt Library, and directs the Peabody Library. Peabody is our College of Education and Human Development.

[31:08] I really appreciated Maha's realistic and nuanced take on educational technology. I was reminded of what Helen Shin said a couple of episodes back. She said, "I don't think of technology as an adversary. I don't think of it as a savior. I think it's just a mechanism."

[31:23] I think that it's a mechanism that I want my students to think critically about, and Maha shared several examples of engaging students in just those kinds of conversations. Maha Bali is very active online and I would recommend that you check out her Twitter account and her blog. We'll have links to those in the show notes as well as links to a few resources that Maha mentioned.

[31:40] You can find those show notes on our website, leadinglinespod.com. We welcome your comments and questions there, and on Twitter, where our handle is @leadinglinespod. Leading lines is produced by the Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Office of Scholarly Communications, and the Associate Provost for Digital Learning.

[31:56] This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month.

[32:01] [background music]

Derek: [32:01] I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.