

# ‘We have dealt with this situation randomly’: A peer ethnographic approach with teachers in refugee settings in the age of COVID-19



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## Abstract

This study examines the challenges faced by English language teachers working in non-formal tertiary education programs in Jordan’s refugee settings. It focuses specifically on their experiences as they transferred their teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws from a post-digital theoretical perspective in which the digital, physical, and social are all interconnected within complex educational ecologies. Working closely with five teachers as peer researchers between April and July 2021, the study utilises the peer ethnographic evaluation research methodology. This paper draws from interview data generated during the study and uses four vignettes to synthesise key findings. The vignettes illustrate the amplified disadvantage experienced by teachers in refugee settings during the pandemic due to pre-existing disparities and emerging digital inequalities. The paper directs attention to human-technology relationships and the ways in which digital technologies are embedded in socio-technical networks, and generate, and potentially worsen, various disadvantages.

## Key Words

Tertiary education, Jordan, English language, digital education

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## Introduction

The urgent move to remote teaching (Hodges *et al.*, 2020) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic had a deep and wide impact on every aspect of teaching and learning, which revealed inequities in access to education (Beaunoyer *et al.*, 2020). Although distant and remote approaches to teaching and learning mediated by technology are not new, they 'have taken on renewed salience' (Williamson *et al.*, 2020, p. 108) during the pandemic, becoming the primary mode of instruction<sup>1</sup>. As teachers world-wide shifted their courses online (An *et al.*, 2021; Gourlay *et al.*, 2021), they were forced to adapt to 'pandemic pedagogies' and implement new ways of working (Williamson *et al.*, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. However, the prolonged lockdowns and social distancing measures presented significant challenges for many teachers who were not equipped or trained to participate effectively in this sudden digital transformation of education. This situation was exacerbated in education in emergencies and crisis-affected contexts.

In such contexts, teachers have diverse responsibilities and 'expanded roles' (Charitonos *et al.*, 2022). Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, teachers were facing additional multiple and interconnected systemic challenges, such as inadequate resources, tensions around curricula which may not be relevant to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, mixed-age and mixed-abilities classes, and students with traumatic life situations (INEE, 2022; Colucci *et al.*, 2017). Teachers in refugee settings have few opportunities for continuing education (Pherali *et al.*, 2020), due to their varied professional status and the challenging conditions under which they and their families live, including restrictions on or loss of their right to work. Teachers thus are often poorly trained and lack a solid professional grounding. During the pandemic, some teachers in these settings used digital technologies; others relied on phone-based activities, radio, and broadcast television lessons; and still others created no-tech packages for remote learning

(INEE, 2022). There is a limited but growing body of research on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching in crisis-affected contexts, but it currently resides mostly outside scholarly peer-reviewed publications. Empirical evidence on the teachers' perspectives at the tertiary and non-formal education levels also remains limited. This study aims to address these gaps.

The study draws from the concept of post-digital, in which the digital, physical, and social are interconnected within complex educational ecologies (Jandrić *et al.*, 2018). It is the attentiveness to human-technology relations that makes this lens suitable for this study. By this we refer not only to wider social and political systems but also the local and often mundane unfolding of social and technological processes and practices in everyday life (Knox, 2019). A post-digital perspective provides a much-needed lens to guide a more nuanced and critical view of our relationships with digital technologies and how they are entangled with existing social practices and wider economic and political systems. The commitment to a post-digital lens is illustrated by the study methodology, peer ethnographic evaluation research (PEER) (Price and Hawkins, 2002; Oguntoye *et al.*, 2009), which foregrounds important principles about epistemological diversity in knowledge creation and different knowledge systems. This methodology enabled us to 'enter' teacher communities, organisations, activities, and contexts that are key to understanding changes to the provision of education in refugee settings during the pandemic, and issues that affect teacher communities in relation to technology and education. The paper draws from data generated from interviews conducted between peer researchers and their peers. It presents vignettes that synthesise key findings related to the teachers' experiences of being an educator in Jordan's refugee settings, including how they dealt with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper provides evidence from an empirical study that brings the voices of teachers into the place they deserve—among other academic work

1 We use 'digital learning' and 'learning technology' to encompass virtual, online, and blended approaches to pedagogy and curriculum design facilitated by digital technology. By 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges *et al.*, 2020), we refer to the rapid global shift of institutions early in the pandemic, distinguishing these from the well-designed online and distance courses created by educational institutions.

2 We use 'teachers' to encompass educators of all levels (e.g. primary, secondary, or higher education), but also teachers in non-formal and community-based settings, such as NGOs.

that examines the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on teaching. This paper seeks to contribute to the expansion of the field of digital education in education in emergencies and crisis-affected contexts. It goes beyond established approaches that might be reinforcing wrongful treatment and unjust structures in meaning-making and knowledge-producing practices. It thus emphasises the need for educational researchers to address epistemic injustice (Kidd *et al.*, 2017) by shifting to ‘new forms of scholarship that make visible the agentic potential and critical role [forcibly displaced people] can have in the transformation of their own social futures’ (Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2016, p. 275).

This paper first provides a brief overview of the study methods and context. It then presents the data in the form of vignettes, and concludes by describing the key study findings.

## Methodology

Working with a group of five language teachers as peer researchers between April and July 2021, this study drew from the PEER methodology (Price and Hawkins, 2002; Oguntoye *et al.*, 2009). PEER is an innovative, rapid, participatory, and qualitative approach to programme research, evaluation, and design. It is based on training members of the target group (teachers as peer researchers) to carry out in-depth qualitative interviews with their peers. Those teachers’ deep awareness of contextual nuances and their strong ability to generate evidence by starting from a place of shared identity, trust, and relationship within their communities makes this methodology particularly suitable.

The study was a collaboration between the Open University UK, Mosaik Education, and Centreity Learning Systems. Using purposive sampling, five teachers were recruited. They included two men and three women with 1.5 to 15 years of teaching experience. Four were refugees—three Syrian, one Sudanese—and one was Jordanian. They were either teaching in Mosaik Education’s English language programmes in Jordan or had taken part in a training programme offered by Mosaik/Centreity in the previous year and had expressed an interest in the study following an initial orientation. A small financial compensation was offered to teachers for their participation. The study received a favourable response from the Human Research Ethics

Committee at the Open University UK (HREC/4008/Charitonos).

In practical terms, the five teachers were trained in qualitative research methods through six, two-hour participatory workshops organised online. The teachers, along with members of the project team, considered the study’s objectives and identified the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for teaching and learning as a key topic to explore. The interview protocol used for the interviews with their peers was a joint output from the workshop series.

Following the workshops, the peer-researchers conducted in-depth interviews with two peers selected from their professional network, and they met twice. The aim was to gain insights into the interviewees’ experiences of the transition to emergency remote teaching. The interviews were not recorded, but the peer researchers were encouraged to take notes. Interviews were confidential and the data anonymised.

After each interview, the peer researchers met with a designated co-researcher from the project team to debrief. Each peer researcher had four debriefing sessions ( $n=20$ , average duration one hour each). The debriefing sessions served as spaces in which to share, capture, and discuss the data gathered and to provide ongoing support in the data collection process. Upon completion of the project activities, the researchers on the project team conducted in-depth interviews (1.5 hours average duration) with the five peer researchers. The aim was to understand their experience as peer researchers, and to share their reflections on some preliminary key themes in the data. Data collection was carried out over a five-week period.

The peer researchers then conducted data analysis with the project team to further describe and identify the key issues emerging from the interviews, and to support the project team’s interpretation of the findings. We synthesised the data for this paper, and present four vignettes of 15 individual cases that illustrate the varied and complex nature of the teachers’ experiences, motivations, and feelings about the challenges they encountered. We recognise the limitations in the four vignettes as representing our selections as authors and being informed by our own positionalities and priorities. In having the agency to construct these vignettes, we recognise the impact of our level of privilege, as

researchers and practitioners in institutions based in high-income countries, and with our limited personal experience of displacement (e.g., only the first author has lived experience of forced displacement). Despite our commitment to work to achieve justice for the displaced, we are aware that our work might reproduce unequal power relations in knowledge creation practices.

## Vignettes

### Vignette 1: Bushra<sup>3</sup>

Bushra lives in an urban environment north of Amman. She is an experienced university teacher who in 2023 is celebrating her 30th year in the field. Her university is part of a project led by a London university to assist young refugees in developing study skills and accessing higher education. Bushra considers herself a facilitator rather than a teacher, and she appears to be compassionate and empathetic toward her students with refugee backgrounds. As she explains, 'I don't want them to feel inferior to me. I work with them to help them find themselves'. At the onset of COVID-19, her university organised a workshop on online teaching which offered some support, but she thought it was inadequate.

Bushra thinks online teaching saves time and effort and provides education to more people. Also aware of its challenges, such as poor internet connections, expensive data, and a lack of devices, she was worried when the pandemic broke out because some of her students were very poor and they struggled the most. She said that 'some of them did not have laptops and had to use their mobile phones. One student had to walk 40 minutes to his uncle's house to use the internet'.

Issues with the quality of web connectivity and technical difficulties were not easily addressed. Bushra described feeling powerless: 'Sometimes the internet would just stop and I could not do anything about it. Sometimes you will think you are doing great and then realise the time has gone because students are asking for technical help'. Bushra reflected that more training for teachers would have provided more opportunities to understand online

teaching, what tools are available, and how to cope with technical difficulties. Bushra added that it is still not too late for this: 'We will use technology more, not less. Teachers really need help with technology right now'.

### Vignette 2: Saliha

Saliha is a Jordanian teacher of English with one year of experience teaching refugees of mixed ages. She is currently teaching as part of a programme offered by an overseas institution. Saliha says her students' needs are important to her, and she tries 'to choose what the students need and sometimes lets them choose or suggest what they want'. Like her colleagues, Saliha says she was clueless when COVID-19 hit the world, and the guidance and instructions she received from within her own organisation were unclear. She describes these days as 'tough times', but adds that she joined other teachers from her network on WhatsApp and they worked together to overcome the barriers that the programme administration was not able to respond to on time, due to time differences.

It was Saliha's first time teaching online, which she describes by saying, 'As a teacher, this was so hard for me to cope, with Zoom application, the first time to teach using Zoom'. She says it was not easy for the students either:

It was complicated and was hard for the students to use [Zoom] at the beginning. Some of the students did not have an email, to have an account or use an application. Some of them had the basic knowledge of how to use the phone [just to call]. It was hard for them to use different applications. They lost their passwords.

For those who had not yet figured out how to use Zoom, WhatsApp provided an opportunity to continue the classes. Saliha shared an example of when teachers used the application to send summaries of the classes to the students.

Saliha's interview illustrated the importance of solidarity and support among teachers during COVID-19. She felt that the teachers worked together as a team to overcome the daily challenges of teaching online, and the volunteer teachers helped other teachers make videos or use applications that

3 The names of interviewees were not known to the members of the project team other than the peer researchers. Pseudonyms are used for the individuals represented in the vignettes.

were new to them. Although the initial transition was uncomfortable, students reported finding the classes helpful. However, the students' ability to participate in online classes was disrupted by a lack of access to core digital infrastructure. Some of Saliha's students, like Bushra's, suffered from poor bandwidth or had no internet at all. Others lacked access to a computer, laptop, tablet, or smartphone. To attend their classes in the periods that followed the strict national lockdowns in Jordan (e.g., March-April and August-September 2020), these students had to travel to cafés, to their friends' homes, or to centres with internet access.

### Vignette 3: Hira

Hira, a Jordanian public school English teacher with five years of experience, provides support classes to Syrian refugees in the afternoons and evenings. She has been teaching students of various ages. Although aligned with the national curriculum, Hira has some flexibility in her teaching methods and is a fan of total physical response, which uses role plays, games, drawing, and active learning. Most of her students have experienced trauma, hence Hira describes her role as 'sensitive': 'I should not be a teacher. I should be a facilitator. [I need to] motivate them, talk to them more, to make them feel comfortable to do the exams'. A typical day for Hira before COVID-19 was already challenging. A lack of resources was one of the main barriers she faced, and she often brought the needed materials from her home or spent her own money to buy them. She did not have access to a personal computer or internet connection at school, so she had no choice but to use her mobile phone.

When she was asked about the transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hira said, 'We have dealt with this situation randomly'. She continued to explain that teachers did not have any knowledge of how to use technology for teaching purposes. When asked to share one positive thing she had heard about the online environment working well for teachers she knew, Hira responded, 'Nothing at all'. The new ways of working imposed on teachers by the pandemic challenged Hira: 'I worked late, it was not organised, students responded on the time they preferred, even at 12 am, and they sent...images or photos by WhatsApp at [that] late time'. Before COVID-19, Hira had enjoyed direct communication with her students, but that was not possible during the health pandemic.

Hira felt left to her own resources when the transition happened. She used her own digital devices and paid for the internet. Her words suggest that she felt lucky, because some of her colleagues did not have their own laptops or any other electronic devices. Internet connectivity and quality were poor, and she also said that the education ministry's online learning platform did not work well. Hira thinks the whole experience could have been better if teachers had been offered training on how to use applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or the government platform, and on how to teach online.

### Vignette 4: Omar

Omar, a Sudanese English teacher in Amman, has worked with refugees of different nationalities, backgrounds, and ages, including adults, since 2019. He surveys his students to understand their needs and interests. Omar describes his role as follows: 'I am not considering myself as a teacher, I am just helping my community'. To illustrate his view, he said that at the beginning of every semester he tells his students, 'I am your brother. Consider me as one of your family members. We are here learning together'. This helps Omar break through his students' fear of speaking English.

The transition to online education was rapid, and in Omar's words, 'everyone was new in this role'. Together with his colleagues, he initiated a pilot conversation class in the beginning. He had 15-16 students in each class, but this soon proved too difficult to manage. The number of students was then reduced so teachers could focus on individual needs. Omar observed that his students enjoyed the transition and the prospect of experiencing something new, and of acquiring new skills.

The new ways of working were different from established practices, and Omar found the background noises and engaging students online challenging. Some of his students did not have a good space for online meetings, as most of the family members shared one bedroom or a living room. Accustomed to observing his students carefully in class, they would now keep cameras off to save internet bandwidth or protect family privacy. Eventually they overcame some challenges or worked around them. However, Omar thinks teachers would benefit from teacher training on engaging students in online lessons.

## Analysis and discussion

COVID-19 had profound implications for educators' lives, work, and knowledge practices, 'with screens, digital devices, and material work arrangements taking on particular importance' (Gourlay *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). The same holds true for teachers in refugee settings, who were already in an environment with significant barriers and systemic disadvantages. However, these barriers were exacerbated by the additional disadvantages and digital inequalities brought on by the pandemic.

The four vignettes illustrate that the sudden move to emergency remote teaching required teachers to secure devices—predominately their personal ones—and establish a space, typically at home with their family, to continue in their professional roles. For teachers, this transition included a range of tasks, including teaching, administration, support, and general communication with students and colleagues, and with teachers beyond their own organisations. This required a strong dependency on digital devices and infrastructure, such as laptops, smartphones, stable electricity, and connectivity for audio or video calls. This all needed to be achieved from home, and for most of the teachers interviewed, this was a stressful period involving improvisation, 'trial and error', and adaptation of their existing pedagogic strategies (e.g., sending summaries on WhatsApp; see Vignette 2). It required them to manage expectations and realise that student participation would take a different form (Vignette 4). It also required managing engagement versus the 'intrusiveness' of technology (Vignette 4), such as students not using cameras to protect their privacy. Teachers also navigated personal challenges in terms of their emotions and additional workload, as evident in Hira's vignette (Vignette 3). Hira clearly felt uneasy with the lack of a clear delineation between home and work and with working prolonged hours. This included struggling with work time intruding on private time when students submitted assignments at any time of the day. Omar (Vignette 4) felt that the background noise in his students' home was disruptive. This notion of blurred boundaries and barriers was a recurrent theme in the data, similar to a finding by Gourlay *et al.* (2021).

The transition to online teaching meant that teachers constantly faced reminders not only of their own but their students' 'digital poverty' (Faith *et al.*, 2022) (Vignettes 1, 2), which is characterised by a lack of access to the resources (e.g., data, devices) necessary to participate online. For teachers and their students in refugee settings, the vast resources of the internet were not within (easy) reach: 'This accessibility gap has never been as acutely felt as during the COVID-19 pandemic' (Taylor and Daniels, 2020). That said, as the vignettes illustrated, this was not simply an access issue, as having access to devices was not enough. As described in Vignettes 2 and 3, access to devices was only one challenge. Teachers also described 'lacking skills' and expressed a need for support, which often was lacking both before and during the pandemic (see Vignettes 2, 3).

Despite the challenges teachers faced, including being suddenly isolated from their everyday professional networks and communities, they also found themselves belonging to an informal network of educators who offered solidarity and care. This helped them manage the transition (Vignette 2). The vignettes show that teachers regularly provided students with emotional support, and a 'pedagogy of care' (Kennedy *et al.*, 2022; Bali, 2015) was discernible in the teachers' descriptions of how they tried to meet their students' needs online and to support one another. For teachers in refugee settings, providing care is common, as illustrated by the descriptions of their roles and pedagogic strategies (e.g., allowing students to draw from their own personal experiences), and is traditionally seen as part of their 'expanded role' (Charitonos *et al.*, 2022). Although such a caring relationship is essential, it alone is not enough to ensure competent teaching (Noddings, 2005). It was evident from teachers' descriptions that they felt they had not received adequate support from their organisations during the online pivot (see Vignette 3). In other words, their organisations did not provide them with care, and teachers thus felt they were alone in learning how to teach online. Furthermore, teachers found technology-mediated communication with students in online classes more challenging than in-person teaching, which sometimes created increased emotional labour and negatively impacted teachers' well-being during the pandemic.

## Concluding remarks

This paper synthesises empirical evidence from a study with teachers in refugee settings in Jordan. It gives voice to teachers who struggled to adapt their practices during the pivot to emergency remote teaching and did so with minimal professional development and technological support. Through the presentation of vignettes, and using a theoretical lens informed by the concept of 'post-digital', the paper illustrates an amplified disadvantage experienced by teachers in refugee settings during the pandemic, where pre-existing systemic disparities and digital poverty set up a vicious cycle. The students and teachers in those settings missed out on educational, social, and professional opportunities and thus were further marginalised. Inequalities associated with the digital realm, such as limited access to technology and the cost of mobile data, are embedded in and interact with wider types of disadvantage that exist offline. Teachers and their students were on the 'worse end' of the 'digital divide', not only because of having limited or no access to devices or data but because they had 'less agency in the digital era' (Jandrić *et al.*, 2019, p. 166), which prevented their meaningful participation and advancement in learning through digitally mediated learning opportunities. It became clear through our study that aspects of digital inequality are entangled with other long-standing forms of inequality that specific communities may face (Robinson *et al.*, 2015). With this in mind, the post-digital lens used in the study served as a helpful reminder that we ought to consider human-technology relationships more carefully, and that the ways digital technologies are embedded in socio-technical networks generate and potentially worsen various kinds of disadvantages. For those of us who are educational researchers, this means that our scholarly work should be attentive to these critical relationships that shape opportunities and life trajectories in specific structural and historical circumstances.

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