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The emergent effects of a wired world to an educational paradigm shift in Saudi Arabia: a case study

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Abstract

In the new world of the virtual and through the lens of the Arabic/Islamic Educational paradigm associated with the internet, distance education may create new settings that pose serious challenges. These challenges become more apparent within a conventional structure of power in a classroom in distinct traditional societies, especially in a Saudi context (Elyas & Picard, 2010). As the 'altar' of the conventional physical classroom is transformed into a mere 'window' through which the instructor is observed, or ignored, power is 'virtually' located in a territory that distances the teacher from the centre of authority. This study follows one teacher journey into the wired world of classroom settings and explores arisen discourses that he is forced to question. The study applies a Foucauldian theoretical framework of power and struggle in investigating the ways in which the teacher's position in the net of classroom power relations is undermined. The virtual 'reality' of online distance learning classrooms generates a set of conditions that result in a new, compromised position of power for the instructor through the absence of direct eye contact and body language, the constant open access to online resources, the possibility of student communication that excludes the teacher, and above all, the reverse panoptic on structure where the teacher is constantly caught up in the possibility of being observed by his/her student without having the ability to observe them. In this paper, we conceptualize that these challenges are greatly undermined and unexplored and more research is needed in order to better equip teachers in such distinct societies.

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Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).*Keywords: English teaching, paradigm struggle, Saudi Arabia, globalisation; Islamic identity*

1. Introduction

In a conventional / physical Saudi classroom, the position of the teacher is one of central, undisputed authority and deference that derives from two sources: the traditional cultural origins of the learning process (Elyas and Picard, 2010); and the "means of correct training" (Foucault, 1977) that have been acquired as part and parcel of the modernization of education in the second half of the 20th century. In the classical paradigm of the first source, not only is the teacher the source of knowledge, but he is above all the imposing figure of moral authority and discipline. Such origins facilitated a smooth ideological transition to the 21st century project of public and university education where "training" in the Foucauldian sense takes place as a result of a rigorous and sophisticated exercise of power that begins with, though never stops at, the figure of the teacher. Although the attempt to achieve an ever more efficient system of training has been constantly guided by approaches that theoretically redefine the position of the teacher in the classroom, such as student-centred approaches, the conventional position of the teacher

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seems to have remained the same (Elyas and Picard, 2010). However, the introduction of the virtual has hitherto been one of the few examples where the Saudi teacher is forced to deal with a new setting that neutralizes the techniques of surveillance which make "...the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics, according to a whole play of spaces, lines, screen, beams, degrees..." (Foucault, 1977).

2. Ontology

Since KSA is a hierarchical society with high power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 1994, 2001), issues of power are important in this study. Equally, since the context of this study is a Saudi university, issues of knowledge and knowledge creation are central. Therefore, the ontological stance of this study emphasizes the role of power in knowledge creation and knowledge creation in power. The links between knowledge and power are captured succinctly in Foucault's statement that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor at the same time any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Hence the ontology (theory of existence), underlying this paper is that productive power relations underpin all aspects of the teaching/learning environment. If someone says, "I am a teacher of English in Saudi Arabia" or "English is an important language nowadays", these statements result from, and result in, productive networks of power.

2.1. Research Design

From the literature review and contextual description in mentioned above, it has been identified that the research site of distance learning within a Saudi university is complex, involving both Islamic/traditional and Western Discourses, which affect the teachers and learners identities and hence their motivation and actions within this environment. This has helped identify a potential "gap" in the literature (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.35) related to the research question, which is novel in its attempt to explore the interplay between the construction space, power and authority within the virtual classroom, and how they impact on and are impacted by the learning environment. Three main elements are explored in the study, which relate to its specific foci: the teacher, the student and the learning environment. These elements are explored through a semi-structured interview (see Appendix 1) and data analysis techniques using Foucault theoretical framework.

2.1.1. Context

The context for the research is the European Languages Department at King Abdul-Aziz University (hereafter, KAU), Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

2.1.2. Participants

The participant in the research an Arabic English teacher. We will use a pseudo name as kareem

2.1.3. Data Types

The core data focus on the participants that is the teachers and the students. This data comprise the semi-structured interviews with one teacher for the scope of this case study

2.1.4. Data Collection Methods

The data collection proceeded at the ELD, Faculty of Arts, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in the October Semester of 2011. Interviews with the Teacher: Three interviews (at the beginning, middle and end of the research period) were held with the teachers in their offices during their office hours. It was important that the teachers should have a sense of

privacy (in their individual offices), and be able to communicate freely in an environment where he/she feels comfortable and in a position of power (see Venuti, 1998; Bunker, 1997; Kumar, 2005; Temple & Young, 2004; Heather & Young, 2007).

The first interview was an introductory meeting between the researcher and the participants. The following two interviews focused on obtaining the research data. This concession was made because it is important in ethical research to ensure that participants, particularly those in countries with high power distance, feel free to express their opinions without fear of retribution (see Appelbaum, Bregman, & Moroz, 1998). The interview with Kareem was conducted in English. The taped audio-recordings were transcribed as soon as possible after the event, and then the transcription was checked and rechecked for accuracy at least four times.

Prior to the interviews a “start list” of constructs Miles & Huberman (1984) was developed and formulated into open-ended questions. Foucauldian terms the researcher aims to unpack the genealogy of Discourses, thus, he/she “seeks to explain present-day cultural phenomena and problems by looking at the past and analyzing how it was derived and constituted historically. It not only looks at who we are at present but also opens up possibilities of what might be and from where we might start to be different in the present. “It forms a critical ontology of ourselves” (Besley, 2002, p. 14).

3. Data Analysis

The classical learning setting that preceded the establishment of the school in this part of the world was the *Halagah*, a word that originally means “ring” and in this context denotes a semicircular arrangement of students sitting around the imam so that he can maintain a constant, direct eye contact with each student, and at the same time act symbolically and physically as the centre of learning. “Here, no actual interactions occur between the imam and the audience, unless it is after the lecture and based on one-on-one interactions. The role of the students and/or receivers of knowledge ‘is’ to learn from the imam or teacher by listening attentively, willingly, and exclusively to him” (Elyas and Picard, 2010, p. 138). As the *Halagah* gives way to the more spatially economic form of the school classroom, the *Halagah*’s exercise of “hierarchized surveillance” is symbolically carried on through the 20th and the 21st centuries as, for example, students at all levels from primary school up to university level, according to Kareem-a pseudo name- still feel obliged to take permission to go to the WC during the lesson/lecture. Escaping the teacher’s constant gaze of discipline has been culturally regulated and coded in a way that reinforces the authority of the teacher in the physical classroom.

Such a “relation of surveillance, defined and regulated, [which] is inscribed at the heart of the practice of teaching, not as an additional or adjacent part, but as a mechanism that is inherent to it and which increases its efficiency” (Foucault, 1977, p. 176), is precisely what Kareem bemoans losing in the setting of the virtual classroom. For the first few online lectures, Kareem and several of his colleagues had the same complaint: “We are never sure if the student is listening!” Even though he knew the lectures were recorded and could be repeatedly listened to, Kareem was concerned by the mere fact that he was oblivious of the object(s) of his virtual gaze. In fact, he found himself the object of the students’ gaze which could not be reciprocated, and so, could not be judged in terms of attitude. Although the programme gave the teacher a list of present students, such a list was only virtual and could not be verified precisely through “the laws of optics and mechanics” that could be exploited in the physical classroom. “The spatial nesting of hierarchized surveillance” here gives way to a new system which is based on the student’s choice of his/her location. Space here is paradoxically harder to partition and control as it becomes flexible and even fluid.

Another area in which Kareem had to readjust was class management and grading students’ participation. Here, the general notions of education, rather than simple teaching, and discipline, or “correct training”, that are supposed to be the base of a conventional educational system are undermined through the loss of one of its key elements:

visibility. One of Kareem's major complaints was "the difficulty of grading in-class participation and progress". As students often chose to limit their participation to the yes/no icon, or a few text messages. Kareem was often kept in doubt about the real person at the other end and his/her 'seriousness and engagement'. The split, fluid space of the virtual classroom is made even harder to manage by the invisibility of the students. If "[t]he exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied visible" (pp. 170-1), as Foucault argues, then virtual classroom upsets the very deep structure of power relations and techniques through its 'invisible space' in which the objects of observation cannot be located, fixed and therefore disciplined. Students' online ubiquity which allowed them to be active in several programs and 'windows' simultaneously was another drawback, according to Kareem. The possibility of exclusive student communication that this technology offered coupled with the impossibility of effective disciplinary eye contact and body language render the "technologies of power" upon which the conventional classroom is based not only futile but utterly irrelevant. One of Kareem recurrent observations has been the impression that the students log in without really being 'in' the lecture, that is, they are either busy with other programmes or away from the computer.

Another challenge to Saudi instructors in the new environment of distance education was the multiplicity of knowledge sources. Although the effects of the information revolution have been pivotal in revolutionizing the learning process in general, its effects in the physical classroom have been relatively limited, thanks to the means of control over the spatial and temporal through the architecture of the classroom and the school as a whole, on the one hand, and the system of hierarchized observation, on the other. The exploitation of the element of space is again obstructed in the context of the virtual classroom in a way that interrupts the teacher's total command over the students' reception of knowledge. While the computer monitor is a limited/limiting device for the teacher, it expands the horizons of learning for the student within the virtual classroom. Kareem found it awkward when he was often bombarded by text messages containing materials related to a point he was about to explain to the students. The act of anticipating every point and acquiring information about it instantaneously at will reduces the instructor to one among many sources of knowledge and decentres him within the temporal limits he is left with as the spatial ones no longer exist.

4. Conclusion

Finally, the evaluation process in the virtual classroom was one of the major concerns [of our teacher and his colleagues] about distance education. As most quizzes are taken online, the 'transparency' of the process is repeatedly raised as an issue to be reconsidered. Although technological solutions to the problem (such as identity recognition devices) have often been proposed, Kareem remains suspicious of any process that does not physically 'isolate' the students for the purpose of 'examination'. Our Foucauldian reading of these misgivings traces them to the original role of examination as a key 'means of correct training'. At the root of suspicions lies the absence of "the normalizing gaze, [the] surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). In an online quiz taken by the student at home, the disciplinary element is nullified as the whole process lacks the ceremonial, ritualized aspect that "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (Foucault, 1977, p. 184).

5. Appendix 1

1-To what extent did your role as a teacher has changed after the introduction of the distance learning?

2-Did you role of a teacher and its position of power changed for better or worse in the distance learning?

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