

## **Reflections on the Experience of Using E-learning in English Language & Literature Teaching at Al-Quds Open University**

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**Abstract:** *Education in "the Information Age" is changing rapidly. Recent developments in technology have opened new vistas for online education, which offers students the flexibility to learn at convenient times and places. This study focuses on illustrating the importance of modern technology in education especially distance education. It displays the experience of utilizing new forms of technology in online education to enhance learning in general and English language teaching in particular. It further highlights some experiments that the researcher has been implementing in e-learning. The study uses the descriptive analytical approach as these experiments are described and evaluated and recommendations given.*

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, educators have witnessed the rapid developments of computer networks, the dramatic improvements in the processing power of personal computers, and the striking advances in magnetic storage technology. These developments have made technology a dynamic force in education, providing new and interactive means of overcoming time and distance to reach learners through types of e-learning. It has become an essential component of the educational process.

The aim of this study is to show how the application of new technology in teaching and learning can enhance the quality of education. It tries to show vital role of new technology especially in distance learning as it helps in increasing interaction between learners and teachers and between learners themselves. Through online education, it offers the students the flexibility to learn at convenient times and places. It can also allow larger numbers of knowledge seekers to have easy quick and affordable access to all branches of knowledge.

### **2. The Present Study: Objectives, Significance and Methodology**

#### **2.1. Objectives**

The study tries to achieve the following objectives:

- Emphasizing the importance of utilizing modern technology in enhancing teaching and learning in general and English language teaching and learning in particular.
- Highlighting Al-Quds Open University's (QOU) achievements in the field of applying e-learning techniques.
- Identifying some e-learning applications in teaching English courses at QOU and listing the major human and technical problems and obstacles encountered in these applications.
- Describing the outcomes of evaluations for these applications.
- Giving some conclusions and recommendations.

## **2.2. Significance of the Study**

As the new technologies used in e-learning are getting more and more popular, Al-Quds Open University has been working hard to update its educational strategies through introducing more e-learning techniques in delivering its courses. Thus, it is expedient to briefly introduce and comment on these endeavors and evaluate them in order to improve their quality. Such a move will enable decision makers to ameliorate the quality and prepare strategic plans for the continuation and enhancement of these endeavors.

## **2.3. Method of the study**

The study uses the descriptive and analytical approaches to display the achievements that have been done and analyze and evaluate them. Towards this end, a questionnaire is used and an achievement test as well.

## **2.4. Glossary**

### **Blended E-learning:**

It is a mixture between the virtual class and the traditional class for the sake of achieving the advantages of the two methods.

### **Video Conferencing:**

It is an effective tool that may be used in distance education settings. This system can be integrated into the distance education program with minimal adaptation to the curriculum and course and is designed to support two-way video and audio communication between multiple locations.

Video conferencing has many advantages as it provides additional access to students at remote sites ( Willis,1993). It also enables connection with experts in other geographical locations (Reed and Woodruff, 1995). Furthermore, it can provide access to at-risk or special needs students (Woodruff and Mosby, 1996).

### **Moodle:**

This is an acronym that stands for *Modular Object Oriented Developmental Learning Environment*. It is an open-source course management system (CMS) used by universities, community colleges, K-12 schools, businesses, and even

individual instructors to add Web technology to their courses. Moodle is currently used to deliver online courses and to supplement traditional face-to-face courses.

Moodle is available for free on the web (<http://www.moodle.org>), so anyone can download and utilise it.

**Synchronous E-learning:**

This involves communication in which interaction between participants is simultaneous.

**Asynchronous E-learning:**

It involves communication in which interaction between parties does not take place simultaneously.

**Video Streaming:**

It is a type of technology which is similar to satellite transmission but is done through the internet. It is live transmission which the learner can follow synchronously or asynchronously by going back to the recordings whenever he wants.

**Virtual Classes:**

It is a tool by which online students meet a tutor and their peers at specific times. This works best when scheduled. Students can communicate by voice and chat. They can also express emotions and attitudes through symbols shown on the chat page Here students are allowed to enter or leave the room . They are also able to raise their hands and ask questions by using certain codes . (O'Donoghue, 2006:283)

### **3. Theoretical Background**

#### **3.1. E-learning and Education/ English Teaching**

Technologies of e-learning have become an indispensable component of the educational process. Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007 define e-learning as:

“the process of learning and teaching using computers and other associated technologies, particularly through the use of the internet.” (p.17).

Debski (2003, 30) claims that

"applications of information and communication technology in L2 [English in this respect] have undergone an evolution both responding to and assisting the advancement of current beliefs about language learning and classroom practice."

Many researchers and educators such as Anderson, 2004; Garrison, 2000; Daniel, 2000; Twigg, 2003; Laurillard, 1997 have also pointed out that technology has considerable benefits that help in improving the quality of the outcomes of education. Some of these benefits are the following:

- The ability to provide education at the right time and to reach students living in remote societies and places, thus overcoming the obstacles of time, place and situation.
- The low and effective cost of education that can reach large numbers of learners.
- The increase in the attention given to the quality of education.
- The increase in the interaction between students themselves, on one hand, and between the learners and the teacher, on the other.
- Providing the students with skills that they will need in their future life.
- Support for the idea of long life learning.

### **3.2. E-learning and Distance Education**

Educators have always stressed the importance of interaction in education. Distance learning also should provide means of interaction. Moore & Thompson (1997) discussed three kinds of interaction in distance education, namely (i) the interaction between the learners themselves, (ii) the interaction between the learner and the teacher, and (iii) the interaction between the learner and the content.

Garrison (2002) and Anderson (2003), on the other hand, have widened the scope of interaction to include: (a) interaction between teacher and teacher, and (b) interaction between the teacher and the content. Paloff and Pratt (2002, p.109) maintain that successful learners in distance education display certain common attributes such as a conscious need to engage in further education, self motivation and increased self discipline

### **3.3. E-courses delivered for Distance Education**

When incorporating the Internet into a course delivered online, the following teaching considerations should be observed.

- All students in a course must have Internet access to ensure equal opportunities for computer interaction and feedback. Also, convenient access to a computer at home or work may influence student success.
- Students may face the concurrent challenges of learning basic computer skills, new software, and appropriate online communication skills. Student computer problems will probably become a part of normal instructional responsibilities. Setting up a specific classroom conference for ongoing discussions of specific hardware and software problems may help students to work through these problems on their own.

- Some students might hesitate to contribute to computer conferences or to send e-mail because of a lack of familiarity with the proper protocols. Teachers are urged to encourage students to use e-mail, classroom conferences, electronic bulletin boards, and the WWW early in the course so they overcome inhibitions. Specifying a minimum number of e-mail communications per week will encourage active participation.
- Using e-mail can help the instructor provide feedback more quickly than surface mail or telephone. Prompt response generally increases student motivation and performance.
- Computer conferences can foster student-to-student interaction. To ensure that this interaction is sustained, teachers are expected to work towards a facilitative role. It might be appropriate to delay response to a query in a classroom conference in order to allow students to respond to the issue and to each other.
- Becoming familiar with the resources available on the Internet and the most effective ways to use them will be part of the instructional challenge. A number of helpful guides to the Internet and WWW are available (Kochmer, 1995; Hughes, 1994).

#### **4. The Application of New Technologies of E-learning in Teaching at QOU**

##### **4.1. Introduction**

Recently QOU has witnessed an educational technological revolution. If we rationalize why QOU is swiftly applying new technologies of e-learning in teaching, we can mention many reasons.

- i. New technologies have become an indispensable component of the educational process. Thus, the University works on utilizing them in its educational programs to maximize the outcomes of education.
- ii. Another reason that prompts the university in this respect is the current revolution in the communications systems. The specific and most applicable reason for this transformation into e-learning is that QOU adopts the system of ODL(Open Distance Learning) in its educational strategy, so it becomes increasingly important to utilize the options provided by modern educational technology to maximize the values of using this system.

This technological development at QOU includes many types:

- Blended learning through the open source: Moodle. So far, around 90 courses have been taught through the Moodle in addition to face-to-face lectures and virtual classes. Ten of these are from the courses in the English Department
- Twenty courses have been delivered through the video streaming technique; some accompanied with activities on the Moodle.

- Five courses utilize the e-template technique.
- Fifteen e-courses were prepared through the Avicenna Virtual University Project.

Three educational regions at the QOU were announced as e-learning zones since last year. These were Ramallah, Hebron and Rafah. This means that the majority of courses offered at these places involve e-learning techniques.

#### **4.2. Training Offered**

Along with the introduction of e-learning courses, the need was there for extensive training to proceed this introduction and also go hand in hand with these attempts. Therefore, the Open Distance Learning Center (ODLC) launched an intensive training program. This training involved primarily instructors and technicians. It was done gradually and involved in the first stage 200 instructors who received intensive training in the techniques of e-learning primarily the use of Moodle and virtual classes as well as the design of e-courses. The training then followed the cascade model i.e. the 200 trained instructors were to train their colleagues and learners as well. In addition, there was continuous evaluation of designed and applied courses done through the relevant departments mainly the Quality Department and the ODLC.

#### **4.3. Description of the E-learning Projects**

All the projects that are described and evaluated in this study involve English teaching and learning which the researcher practiced and designed either individually or as part of a team. They include the following:

1. An e-learning English teaching training course via video conferencing.
2. An online English course titled "*Remedial English*". (Blended learning with media.)
3. A literature course taught through video streaming.
4. A literature course taught through face to face meetings, virtual classes, and Moodle platform.

##### **4.3.1 The first Project: The Video Conferencing Project**

The project's main aim was to demonstrate how videoconferencing can be used in ESP, EAP and EFL as a cost-effective and accessible e-learning tool locally and internationally. Videoconferencing here was used in its basic universal meaning, i.e. 'a method of conferencing between two or more locations where both sound and vision are conveyed electronically so as to enable simultaneous interactive communication' (Mason & Rennie, 2006, 120)

This project was the result of the cooperation among QOU English Department, The British Council, The University of London & IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language). The researcher was the Palestinian coordinator of the project due to her position as the chairwoman of the English Department at QOU. It consisted of various

videoconference sessions held during the academic year 2007-2008. It was exclusively for the English program at QOU. The project was delivered from Britain to Palestine and was run as three-hour bimonthly sessions addressing ELT issues.

As for the number and place of locations linked, it was held in four sites (with 30 students each) at QOU educational regions Jerusalem, Ramallah, Hebron & Gaza. The students were all prospective teachers from the ELT program at the university. The sites were all linked with the British Council's headquarters in London from where the lecturers from The University of London and other British universities transmitted their lectures. There was full commitment and cooperation between all sides. The connectivity was acceptable with minor problems mostly problems of disconnectivity.

The topics for the VC sessions were mostly ELT issues e.g.: teaching structure, developing writing skills, teaching communication skills for large classes, lesson planning and teaching pronunciation. Pre-tasks for sessions were emailed from instructors to all students through a especially designed link group and post tasks were given after each session. Responses to these tasks were sent to instructors by email to be corrected.<sup>1</sup>

There were many benefits for this project:

- It was a good means of utilizing technology in language teaching.
- It offered good training in ELT topics that the prospective teachers need. It enhanced the training that they received in their courses at the university.
- The sessions allowed for a good degree of interactivity through face to face discussions between all sites as well as through e-correspondence between learners and instructors and learners themselves.
- The project helped in increasing cooperation between different institutions

The British ELT experts and the Palestinian participants (trainee teachers and their trainers alike) evaluated the project and concluded that the project reached a high level of pedagogical and technological advancement. The project brought out the best in video conferencing as a vehicle of knowledge transmission in e-learning and distance education.<sup>2</sup>

- i. It has been instrumental in bringing about evolutionary and revolutionary changes to the traditional modes of ELT (ESP, EAP, EFL) delivery in Palestine and abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> Participants were given certificates upon the completion of the training course issued from the British Council.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to mention that the project received due recognition UK-wide, it was shortlisted for the British Council 'Eltons', which is a prestigious award for innovations in the area of ELT.

- ii. It has made use of the most recent advances in e-learning, distance education and blended learning.
- iii. It also helped in securing a number of audio visual aids to be used later from the video tapes of these sessions and from the following site provided by the British Council for these sessions.

[http://dpx.com/\\_bc\\_2/dpx.php?cmd=autoplay&type=autofocus&pres=442&media=wm&dpxuser=dpx\\_bc\\_2](http://dpx.com/_bc_2/dpx.php?cmd=autoplay&type=autofocus&pres=442&media=wm&dpxuser=dpx_bc_2)

#### **4.3.2. The Second project: "Remedial English"**

This was an online English course and one of the five outcomes of the *Rufo* Project, which is an e-Learning project through TEMPUS. It comprised a consortium of five universities in the West Bank, three in France, two in Spain and one in Belgium. It aimed at incorporating e-learning at tertiary educational institutions in Palestine. Each of the five Palestinian universities was to develop an on line course jointly with another university in the West bank through a team from the participating universities.

At the beginning, a training program was offered. This involved theoretical and practical components. The outcome of the project was the completion of five e-learning projects in various fields. To follow the development and completion of the projects, three committees were formed from the participating teams to insure the implementation of the standards and criteria used in developing these projects. These were: the delivery committee, the pedagogical committee and the e-learning development and evaluation committee. The English course was a partnership between QOU and Birzeit University. The researcher was the coordinator of the course and participated in the preparation and the implementation of the course.

As for the pedagogical specifications of the project, it was a blended e-learning English course aimed at intermediate level students to improve their English language skills. It incorporated the use of face to face classes and the Moodle platform. The course is distinguished in technical quality as it used developed multimedia. The target group for the course was first year university students. It was intended to introduce e-learning technique for the existing English course titled English(1) (0113) so it depended primarily on the syllabus used for the course after being modified and redesigned to suit e-learning purposes.

The project has a number of added educational values:

- It provides training in studying by a blended system of e-learning.
- It facilitates the role of the learner by enhancing his autonomy and self motivation.
- It involves synchronous and asynchronous interaction and collaboration between the learners themselves and the teacher.
- It incorporates developed media in the design of the course.



The implementations of the course were as follows: Al-Quds Open University in two regions: Ramallah and Hebron since 2008/2009 and some sections at Birzeit University.<sup>3</sup>

### **Evaluation of the Project**

The evaluation was intended to check the quality of the course, get feedback from users and guide the project team on how they can work towards improving any aspects in the course. The tools that were applied in evaluating the online course were a questionnaire for students, a checklist of standards to be used to measure the quality of the online courses, and views from team members of the project and instructors implementing the course. The questionnaire that was used for students focused on the following five areas:

- Connection and use of Internet: this part intended to discover the availability of internet facilities of students and the technical infrastructure of the university and the students' familiarity with the net and their frequency of using it.
- Opinions on the online course: this part explored the students' opinions about the online course; its objectives, structure, ease and speed in use and navigation.
- Face-to-face and online communication: This measures the effectiveness of the online forms of communication e.g.: chats, forums compared to the forms of face to face communication.
- Communication with the instructor-tutor, the other students. This part tries to check if this communication is sufficient and as effective as effective the face to face communication.
- Concerning the online learning: It deals with the advantages, difficulties & reactions to online learning.
- The sample used for the questionnaire consisted of 100 students.
- The results of the questionnaire showed that:
  - 50% of students use the course at the university only as they lack internet facilities.
  - 40% faced some occasional technical problems and needed assistance.
  - 65% of students expressed satisfaction at the end of the course.
  - 52% of students preferred face to face classes over on line learning.
  - 67% of students liked the design of the course and thought that it was easy and enjoyable to use.

Another method of evaluating the course was conducted by the researcher in the second semester 2008. She used two groups. The first which included four sections, who used the online course, was used as the experimental group and the second, which included another four sections who studied the same course

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<sup>3</sup> There were obstacles of widening the implementation of the course on a wider scale due to the difficulties in providing suitable servers as the course is to be offered to thousands of students.

without the e-learning components, was used as the control group. The final grades for the students of both groups were compared. The following table shows the results of this comparison.

<b>Learners</b>	<b>Pass</b>	<b>Fail</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Pass %</b>
E-learners (4 groups)	85	35	120	70%
Traditional learners (4 groups)	80	40	120	66%
Total	170	70	240	

These results show that students who used the online course scored relatively better grades than those who were taught using only the face-to-face meetings and the printed textbook. Although the improvement in grades is slight, it is an encouraging indicator that shows how students are interacting with the e-version of the course.

#### **4.3.3. The Third Project: Teaching through the Technique of Video Streaming**

Video Streaming is a type of technology which is similar to satellite transmission but is done through the internet. It is live transmission which the learner can follow synchronously or asynchronously by going back to the recordings whenever he/she wants. "Learning on Demand". Live chat associated with this technique allows for interaction between the instructor and the learners

##### **How is a video streaming course organized at QOU?**

The course was offered at all regions and centers of the university. A suitable coordinator for the course was chosen to run the whole course. This coordinator had to give the live transmitted lectures (around 12 lectures 90 min. each.) and the schedule of the lectures was announced and emailed in advance. He also had to prepare the centralized exams and assignments. Furthermore, the coordinator was to communicate with the supervisors at the regions through the created e-link and forums and some virtual meetings between them. Each supervisor gave a minimum of four face-to-face meetings in which he reinforced the coordinators' work and administered discussions. Supervisors also ran forums with their students.

There are a number of advantages for this technique. These are mainly its suitability for distance learning as it provides "Learning on Demand" for learners as they can watch them wherever and they can also download the transmitted lectures and listen to them at their convenience. Another advantage

is the choice of good teachers to give the lectures. There is also room for good synchronous and asynchronous interaction. This technique also helps to train learners in how to use technological communication.

Teaching "The Literary Survey course" through video streaming was a fruitful experience that the researcher practiced. The researcher gave live lectures and supplemented it with enriching materials. There was a considerable amount of interaction between the researcher and the learners during the live session. She also conducted forums with the learners and the other instructors. The unified exams allowed for a sort of evaluation for the achievement of learners.

As for the learners' attitudes towards this literature course taught through video streaming, the researcher surveyed these attitudes by a simple questionnaire which she used to explore this issue. It represented 8% of the learners in four locations (60 students). The results showed that (67%) of the students involved showed positive impressions towards the experiment and encouraged the continuity of this technique. (78%) of students followed the live transmission synchronously. 85% of students downloaded the lectures to listen to them at their convenience. As for technical problems that students faced in following the live transmission, around 52% said they followed the live lectures from the university internet labs as they did not have access to the internet at home.

#### **4.3.4. The Fourth Project: Teaching through Virtual Classes**

Virtual Classes represent another technique used in e-learning used at QOU. It allows space through the internet for the teacher and the learners to meet online at specific times. Students can communicate by voice and chat and interact synchronously. The learners can also go back to the recordings anytime they want. It is used as part of a blended e-learning course.

### **5. The Researcher's Experience in Teaching through vVirtual Classes**

This was done for a literature course titled: *Twentieth Century American Literature*. The course, like some other initiated blended e-courses, combined many techniques: face-to-face sessions, Moodle platform and interaction, virtual classes and the printed textbooks designed to suit self learning.

The practical application of virtual classes proved that this technique has advantages as well as some problems and setbacks. The advantages include mainly the interaction between teachers and learners and learners themselves that the environment of the virtual classes allows for. Another advantage is the skills that the students get in using this new technology. The setbacks that were confronted include: the lack of technical facilities and the e-learning incompetency for some students, the unwillingness of some students to try new things and the preference of many of them to use the recorded lectures at their

convenience rather than attend the live virtual class especially that the attendance to these classes is still optional.

## **6. Conclusions**

As a result of this study, the researcher can make the following conclusions:

- Technology helps in improving the quality of education.
- Distance education in particular benefits from new educational technologies because they allow for more interaction, autonomy and personalization of learning.
- There is sufficient encouragement from learners for these technologies in spite of the impediments and problems that they face and in spite of the shortage of internet facilities for a number of students.
- In spite of the tremendous efforts that have been made so far, there are still obstacles and issues to be addressed to make e-learning at QOU more productive such as the unsatisfactory technical facilities, insufficient student training and shortage of qualified teachers in designing and implementing e-courses.

## **7. Recommendations**

As a result of the study, the following recommendations could be given:

- There is a need for more training in e-learning techniques and strategies for teachers and learners.
- Gradual introduction of e-learning courses for students is recommended. (don't involve the learner with many courses of different techniques simultaneously.)
- More strategic planning for the management of e-learning is needed. The university has to develop and adopt a strategy of gradual introduction of e-learning.
- Improvement of the technical infrastructure and facilities. This should include providing higher internet speed, wireless internet at the university campuses and stronger servers.
- Working on supporting the notion of e-learning among teachers and students.
- The load of teachers and number of students per class in e-learning courses should be discussed carefully.
- Work should be continued to maximize the benefits of new e-learning technologies.
- More research on these issues is to be conducted. This research should include evaluation of the design and implementation of courses, attitudes of teachers and learners and ways of improvement.

Finally, Al-Quds Open University has been very keen on constantly updating its standards and utilizing all types of new educational technology to maximize the quality of its educational programs and achieve its message as an institute that applies the high standards of the system of open distance education.

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