

Automating PAAET: the Kuwaiti Distance Learning Project – a Personal Reflection

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Abstract

This is a personal perspective of the implementation of a distance learning project in a Kuwaiti organization. This paper reflects the involvement of the author in the project and explores the reasons behind the failure of the first phase of the project. The absence of a strong pedagogical reason for such a project, the erasure of faculty and students' voices, and the failure to recognize that e-Learning is different from face-to-face are reasons that have contributed to the failure of the project so far. A shared responsibility of all parties involved and a clear pedagogical vision could save this project.

1. Introduction

This paper is a personal account of my own involvement in the Kuwaiti distance learning project at my college. I reflect back on the initiation and implementation of this project, and use my personal experience as the platform to evaluate the events that took place informed by the different views in the literature. Personal reflection and inquiry involves the researcher in a conscious and critical reflection into the researcher's own experience. "Such a process is founded on the assumption that personal experience is a valid source of knowing and that critical reflection is an essential process in this coming to know. The critical element of the reflection involved brings a rigor into the process which would otherwise risk falling into self-deception and self-

absorption. The understanding gained through such a process both informs the researcher's personal understanding and research purpose, and forms a framework within which to further investigate the issues raised" [1].

I divide the paper into three main sections. The first section I call 'My Journey in Distance Learning.' In it I give a general view on how I got interested in distance learning and I lay out the series of events that took place and led to my involvement in the Kuwaiti distance learning project. 'PAAET and the Distance Learning Project; Automation or Innovation?' is the title of the second section where I discuss the main objectives of the project raising some issues of concern. In the third section: 'Video conferencing; automation and cost-cutting' I briefly discuss the Kuwaiti administrators' efforts to initiate the video conferencing technology.

My analysis throughout the paper focuses on two main issues. The first issue that I discuss is the cost effectiveness and the technical claims for enrichment that underlie the Kuwaiti distance learning project. I also allude to the second issue which is to do with the methodological concerns that a technological approach rather than a human centered approach is used. I end the paper with the conclusion.

2. My journey in distance learning

The Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET) is a government organization which offers education and training to students of different educational backgrounds. The applied education sector in PAAET consists of five colleges, while the training sector comprises twelve institutes and centers. Education and training in all colleges and institutions is segregated so there are women's colleges and institutes and men's colleges and institutes. The biggest of all is the College of Basic Education which hosts around six thousand women students in the women's college and around two thousand men students in the men's college. Students receive a Bachelors degree in education after successfully completing a 4-year program in a field of their choice. I work at the department of Educational technology at the women's College of Basic Education.

My first experience with distance learning was in 2002 when I enrolled in an online module offered by a U.K. university on networked learning. My decision to enroll was affected by what was happening in my department. At that time everybody was talking about computers and e-learning. In my department there was a serious dispute taking

place amongst my colleagues concerning the suitability of certain staff members teaching courses related to computer technologies. The argument grew out of a belief that tutors should teach courses related to their area of expertise determined by their Ph.D. research. 'The best interest of students' was the catchphrase that those colleagues used in their argument.

This disagreement amongst staff members in my department prompted me to enroll in the networked learning module. I wanted to see for myself what was so special about computers and advanced technologies. Because this was my first experience of participating online, I had doubts concerning the effectiveness of the learning associated with this form of distance learning. One important thing I have learned is that online learning is just as effective as face-to-face learning.

This experience marked my journey in distance learning. And as a result of it I drafted a detailed proposal and presented it to the curriculum development committee at my department suggesting that our department should take the initiative to offer online courses and increase students' choices, to what I believed to be pedagogical innovations. I heard nothing from the committee and the proposal died.

Around a year later, the Head of Educational Technology Department was approached by two professors, acting as representatives of an American university, to initiate e-learning in our department. This project was funded by the American Government, as we were told, to strengthen relations with Arab and Muslim countries. To be involved in such a project we had to get a chain of approvals starting from the Dean of the college up to the Director of the Authority. The project collapsed because no Kuwaiti decision was taken.

During 2004 my department was approached, this time, by the Information and Computer Centre (ICC) at PAAET. We were told that there was a surplus in the budget which they wanted to invest in e-learning. They had already approached a specialized computer company to initiate the e-learning project. A proposal was drafted by the company and was forwarded to us.

A small departmental team was formed to study the proposal. Several fruitful meetings took place between representatives of the ICC, the Educational Technology Department and the supplier company. It was then decided to implement the e-learning project on a smaller scale within the Educational Technology Department including the installment of a video conferencing system. We also agreed to carry out an evaluation proceeding the experimentation period of the system

before expanding e-learning to other departments and colleges. The department was asked to write a case for the e-learning project. The expanding numbers of students, the shortage in staff members, the quality and choices of learning and the life circumstances of students especially women (being married and raising children) were the main reasons we argued for.

Few months later our department received a letter from the ICC (at PAAET) informing us that a fixed budget has been allocated for the first phase of the distance learning project. They asked us to review the Request for Proposal (RFP) of the distance learning project prepared by them. To our surprise this report was the same as the initial one which we had already seen and discussed with the supplier company.

In May 2006, an e-learning team was officially formed which consisted of representatives of most colleges and divisions under PAAET. This team was to pursue the implementation of the project. I represented my department. It was during the first meeting of the team that we learned that PAAET embraced e-learning and the General Director supported the project and requested the implementation to be carried out on a large scale (the whole organization).

This came as a surprise to us because it contradicted the initial understanding and agreement which was important to us as none of the tutors in the department taught in an online environment. And most likely most of our students (if not all) had not been in an online classroom. Reflecting upon how the e-learning project developed it becomes clear to me that our department was used to agree upon a project already tailored for the whole organization.

3. The Kuwaiti distance learning project; automation or innovation?

The first phase project report describes the aims of the distance learning project and suggests that the rapid technological development will have a deep impact on training and educational institutions. The booklet further spells out the vision of the project by stressing that "the implementation of the Kuwaiti distance learning project will allow PAAET to join other major educational institutions in providing educational and training services to a large number of clients using advanced technology" [2]. This vision of the distance learning project in effect emphasizes that using advanced technology guarantees a (higher) status with 'famous' international educational institutions,

placing PAAET now and the education and training associated with it at a lower status.

The number of students enrolled in all colleges and training institutes under PAAET is around 30,000 with a yearly increase of 2% [2]. Being one of the two higher educational institutions in Kuwait which are governmental, PAEET is under the pressure of accepting the increasing numbers of Kuwaiti students. Transforming PAAET into a virtual one seems to be seen as the solution to the increasing numbers of students and at the same time cutting the costs of delivery. Cost effectiveness and technical enrichment are the most important elements argued for concerning the Kuwaiti project. In fact they appear to be the driving force behind the whole project. In addressing the introduction of online education to his university (San Diego State University), Feenberg alludes to a similar point which connects online education with expense. He argues that "Administrators hope to use new technology to finesse the coming crisis in higher education spending, and to accommodate exploding enrollments of young people and returning students." [3]

In an automated system, as Feenberg further explains, it is expected that by reproducing the physical presence of a tutor in a classroom and making it available in one form or another for example over the internet, greater savings will be made. The connection between e-learning and greater savings is supported by advocates in both sectors; education and training. For example within a business setting, Mackay states that there are claims that training based on e-learning is cost effective compared to the traditional instructor-led and classroom-based training. The reason behind this claim, as Mackay suggests, is that "There's a lot less traveling to class for students and instructors, which means lower costs for the company and more time on the job." [4]

Whether in education or training, the argument of cost effectiveness is based on a comparison between the e-learning classroom and the face-to-face classroom. The two types are seen in opposition to each other. No real attention is given to difference between the two types, such as in pedagogy and environment.

Knowles, for example, addresses what he refers to as 'shifts in pedagogy' as a result of using IT and advanced learning technologies in higher education. He stresses that the use of IT and technology has raised a number of issues. Such issues are related to the challenges that these technologies pose to traditional approaches to teaching and learning. For example issues related to the type of classroom that online learning creates, the role and identity of the instructor and also of the

student, and the "level of interactivity and the loss of face to face contact between learners and instructors." [5]

The Kuwaiti distance learning project does not suggest any pedagogical model or raise any pedagogical issues concerning the e-learning environment. It is left to the faculty members to find out 'what to do' and 'how to do'. In a response letter addressed to me, the Head of Information Systems at ICC statement clearly states that "this project was initiated without a clear vision. It was not clear what was supposed to be accomplished by e-learning. This must be addressed before expanding the project" [6]. The fact that the project study and the final report was carried out by the supplier company instead of staff members and administrators at PAAET is another indication of the lack of serious thought put into the project. To say that "PAAET has no previous experience in writing e-learning study proposals" [6] as an excuse to adopt the same proposal prepared by the supplier is erroneous.

The Kuwaiti situation resembles that of San Diego State University when online education was introduced under the sponsorship of Microsoft, Fujitsu and others. Regarding the order of events of how the online project developed Feenberg wonders: "Would you build a house this way or design a new kind of car or refrigerator? Surely it is important to find out how the thing is going to be used before committing a lot of resources to a specific plan or design." [3] His explanation for why things occurred the way they did is that the technology of online education is not conceived "as a system, including novel pedagogical challenges, but as an infrastructure, an "information superhighway," down which...faculty were invited to drive. And just as drivers are not consulted about how to build the roads, so faculty were not involved in designing the educational superhighway." [3]

So what kind of innovation do the Kuwaiti administrators expect the technology of distance education to encourage, and how do they expect technology to enrich students' and tutors' experiences? Kilmurray associates innovation with the process of delivery (tutor-student interaction). He sees e-learning providing "a different learning environment in which instructors can employ *new* learning models and *new* instructional practices." [7] But he contends that most courses offered online today appear to follow the traditional classroom norm; instructor-directed classes. And therefore Kilmurray asserts that "*Automation is happening, but not innovation.*" [7] In relation to the Kuwaiti distance learning project not much thought (if any) was put into the process of delivery - online pedagogy. Hence pedagogical

objectives seem to "take the back seat to prestige and budgetary ones."
[3]

In 'Multimedia Learning', Richard Mayer presents two views of multimedia design. He explains that "The most straight forward approach to multimedia design is technology-centered. Technology-centered approaches begin with the functional capabilities of multimedia and ask, 'How can we use these capabilities in designing multimedia presentations?' The focus is generally on cutting-edge advances in multimedia technology" [8]. In this approach all attention is given to the technology while learners receive secondary attention. So in effect instead of adapting technology to fit the needs of learners, they are, in this approach, forced to adapt to the demands of technology. Mayer contends that the technology-centered approach fails to lead to lasting improvements in education. On the other hand a learner-centered approach begins "with an understanding of how the human mind works and ask(s), 'How can we adapt multimedia to enhance human learning?' The focus is on using multimedia technology as an aid to human cognition." [8] In this sense learners and their needs come first.

The Kuwaiti project, PAAET seem to have opted out for a technology-centered approach where technology takes precedence over learners. There is an apparent erasure of the tutors and learners. For example, there is no mention of their needs, the skills they need to acquire, and changes they have to adapt to. In accordance, Altuhaih writes about his experience as a tutor at Kuwait University. He alerts that choosing technology is a difficult matter and that the biggest of mistakes that could be committed is not to involve students and tutors in the decision making process. Often, Altuhaih goes on explaining, neither tutors nor students are consulted, on the contrary they find themselves obliged to use what have been decided by others [9].

In their research regarding developing online courses in some Latin American countries, Zurita and Ryberg have noticed that "the degree of motivation varied between the different teachers. Most of them had an idea of wanting to learn about ICT in teaching and learning, but not all knew why. Many of them seemed interested in learning mainly because they were told to, not because they felt any need for the change" [10]. As a result they conclude that not all the teachers were interested in changing their pedagogical practice, but mostly in having a new tool to continue using the same techniques. [10]

Finally, the Kuwaiti administrators and supplier company maintain that e-learning offers the opportunity for education and training to all individuals at any place and any time [2]. Many advocates of distance

learning and automation of higher education do stress this point as well. Knowles, for example, identifies IT and asynchronous learning networks as a significant force affecting higher education and dissolving the boundaries of geography, time and space" [5]. Some are convinced that students will learn just as much if not more, and they will be free to study at their own pace. [3]

Automating Kuwaiti higher education in essence is not only seen to offer a solution "for larger numbers at a discount" [3] but it is also seen as having a transforming capacity which brings with it 'suitable, innovative and high quality' Kuwaiti higher education. But since the implementation of the first phase of the system to this point time, the system remains unused by staff members [6].

4. Video conferencing; automation and cost-cutting

Video conferencing is an important part of the first phase of the Kuwaiti distance learning project. By August 2006, two lecture rooms were equipped with video conferencing technology, with the purpose of "enabling tutors to teach a large number of students at the same time by creating virtual classrooms." [2] These two rooms are the first of many to be established around campus for both men and women colleges. Video conferencing is seen to create opportunities for students to attend lectures despite their geographical positions. Hence, offering multi-site access to on-campus lectures.

This technology was not received with open arms by some of the members of staff in my department. There were heated discussions around the 'real' purpose of this technology and in fact of the whole e-learning project. Few members thought that there was a hidden agenda. Others opposed the technology because they doubted that it would work. They could not see how a face-to-face experience could be reproduced virtually. There was also genuine worry about the students and their readiness to such technology and the virtual classroom. Tutors expressed their concern regarding managing the virtual classroom and the work load that the virtual class would bring with it. Part of the rejection might have been caused by tutors' fear of change.

In the departmental meetings faculty members expressed their refusal to use the technology. In fact they boycotted all training sessions held by the supplier. The two video conferencing rooms remain locked and unused to this day.

Video conferencing is seen as a major solution for the growing numbers of students. It is so because, as Feenberg explains it,

"Video conferencing allows a professor to address a large number of students in remote locations. Live interaction can be supported by a two-way video feed. The physical presence of teachers and students in the classroom can be reproduced electronically at some cost but more students can be served without expanding existing campuses." [3]

During the e-learning team meetings it was clear that the Kuwaiti administrators were unable to see that teaching and learning in a virtual classroom is in itself a challenge to both tutors and students and needs more thought put into important matters such as teaching strategies and methods. O'Donoghue et. al records mixed students' and tutors' reactions to video conferencing [11]. Nonetheless video conferencing is seen to provide the closest equivalent to the classroom experience [3]. But what seems to be naïve, to me, is that PAAET administrators had bought these expensive technologies with the belief that tutors would simply use them. What is even more bewildering is that they expected tutors to use the technology under the same set of organizational rules. There was no mention of the changes that the organization should embrace as a result of the new technology, to say the least, for example, the structure of the academic programs and rules concerning teaching hours and extra pay. Regarding this Knowles identifies information technology as one current force affecting higher education organizations as they relate to alternate delivery such as video conferencing. He states that

"The impact of IT on higher education organizations requires that universities and colleges not only consider alternative organizational models, but also examine their policies. In this regard, there is a need for revision and coordination of policies, not just for individual institutions, or even a network of institutions, but on a provincial and national level." [5]

So while PAAET administrators seem to see education and the educational organization as static while money and revenue as changing, staff members see the contrary. But at the same time, by refusing to accept any responsibility for using and experimenting with video conferencing the Kuwaiti tutors in my department are in effect refusing their share and responsibility to shape this technology and its usage.

Finally, what I find annoying is the erasure of the students' share in the distance learning project on a whole and the video conferencing part specifically. Students have not been recognized as subjects who have interests in this project. It was agreed that during the first phase of the project some effort will focus on "preparing a work plan that supports the shift towards using e-learning and minimizing the cultural

and social obstacles that might prevent accepting the technology as a learning tool." [2] This work plan was referred to as 'change management'. Yet there has been nothing done so far which reflects such effort. No research has been conducted to see what cultural or social barriers exist if they do at all. There have been no seminars conducted and no lectures presented to students in the different colleges and Institutes to introduce the project.

The Kuwaiti distance learning project could be enriched and modified to fit Kuwaiti tutors and learners' needs by researching other similar projects whether locally or outside Kuwait, and by investigating how other institutions implemented e-learning [12].

5. Conclusion

Two important issues surface the analysis of the Kuwaiti distance learning project; cost-effectiveness which is based purely on technological concerns is one, and the second is to do with the technological approach to project management. Although the Kuwaiti administrators have a genuine concern to improve education for students in the different colleges their unawareness of the importance of the human involvement brought the e-learning project closer to failure. From the start there was an absence of the human voice; departments, faculty members, and students were not consulted at any stage of the project. There was no clear pedagogical reason for implementing e-learning and the new technology, and the project was not based on learners' and tutors' needs. The Kuwaiti administrators have also failed to understand the nature of e-learning and that it is different from face-to-face learning.

This project needs to be seen as a shared responsibility amongst administrators, faculty members and students in order for it to succeed. In my opinion efforts should be geared towards investigating the pedagogy of e-learning to better understand the changes to be made and the skills to be acquired. Exploring the cultural and social matrix within which these technologies are implemented is crucial for the success of this project. As it seems now the Kuwaiti administrators had bought the idea that the advanced technology is suitable for every context and that it will solve the problems that face-to-face education could not.

6. References

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