



Liberated Spaces: The Use of iPads and the Possibility for Change in Higher Education

Shada Shahin¹, Raphaela Fischer-Mourra²
Bethlehem University, Department of English (Palestine)^{1,2}

Abstract

As part of an ongoing pilot project, this study examines the integration of iPads as a learning device to enhance the critical thinking and creative abilities of students in specific English language and literature courses at Bethlehem University, Palestine. Western educational institutions have strived to incorporate the Apple iPad into their curricula since its release in 2010 in an attempt to revisit the definition of college learning and bring it into the 21st century. Few initiatives if none, however, have been made in the Middle East to implement and examine the practicality and efficacy of using these interactive touch screen interface tablets, facilitating and enhancing the teaching and learning dynamic, as well as enabling and empowering students to become active agents in their academic and personal productivity in institutions of higher education. In this paper, we contend that the integration of technology—iPads—in higher education in the Middle East, in general, and Palestine, in particular, is emancipatory—that it is a subtle decolonization technique against an outmoded system of rote learning and testing that, as Paulo Freire argues in another context, turns both high school students into passive receptors and teachers into passive depositors of knowledge. Exposing students and teachers to an alternative method of teaching and learning which utilizes the interactive nature of the iPad, along with a reformed syllabi, is likely to produce non-conformist minds, cleansed of all the asymmetrical power relations that define a traditional teacher-student relationship. Utilizing this technology will also empower both to find a shared creative space necessary for a true liberation of the mind. This paper also strives to disprove the traditional approach that criticizes such technological initiatives as causing a “digital distraction” in the classroom. This study rather demonstrates that iPad technology can have a positive impact on students’ engagement, motivation, collaboration, and overall achievement.

1. Introduction:

“Having access to iPads gave us the freedom to think creatively.” Randa and Areej, two senior English majors at Bethlehem University, reflected on their experience after completing the English for Advocacy in which they produced digital stories about issues pertinent to their daily lives through utilizing the iPads. Their project “The Israeli Apartheid Wall” examined the destructive effects the segregation wall has on Palestinian students’ dreams, aspirations, and perceptions of reality. Randa said, “Using the iPad made us more engaged in completing these tasks. I felt I wasn’t confined to pen and paper. Anybody can write a research paper about the wall; however, using this device made us more involved to actually see the wall, and interview people who have been affected by it.”

It is undeniable that the Israeli occupation has had its huge impact on the disintegration of Palestinian education. As Jamil Khader states that the Israeli colonial occupation systematically restricted the mobility of students and faculty, destroyed university property and infrastructure, repeated raided campus, and closed universities and converted “academic institutions into temporary prisons and detention camps,” and confiscated student organization material [1]. In addition, the Israeli occupation intensified “the colonization of the mind [2]” as evident in a system that is rooted in rote learning, fossilized thinking, and needless cramming of information. Consequently, our students are ill-equipped to engage with the more critical aspects of university education or what Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, calls “banking education [3]”. This is a part of the debate over standardized testing around the world today especially, in the context of the Palestinian General Secondary Examination (Tawjihi). These exams determine students’ future, choice of university, and field of study, and have proven to be an inactive learning experience. Teachers also constantly express their frustration with the inadequacy of a system that obstructs authentic learning. Munir Fasheh, self-proclaimed “healed Palestinian educator,” argues that “official education” what he calls “think tank” such as the Tawjihi is a futile attempt to measure students’ performance. Labeling them either a success or a failure through “grading,” he claims, “is degrading [4]”.



Though many Palestinian educators are aware of the inefficacy of this traditional teaching and learning approach, they are unaware that system turns the students into passive receivers and the teachers into passive depositors of knowledge. As a result, Palestinian students and teachers have fallen victims to what Basem Ra'ad, a Palestinian literary critic and historian, calls "self-colonizing traps" by which he means, "any unquestioning acceptance of indoctrination, of what a system wants people to believe for its own ends [5]".

In light of the debilitating effects of the occupation and the archaic system of education in Palestine, and with the international and national calls for modernizing Palestinian education through the integration of technology in the teaching and learning process, the iPad can be a catalyst in the true liberation of young Palestinian minds. Integrating iPads in the curriculum can enhance creativity, civic engagement and create committed critical thinkers who can develop "transnational literacy" concerning social, economic, and political realities. Education for liberation involves any project that requires students to step out of the metaphorical box to ask critical questions, think creatively, and consider innovative solutions to these problems.

2. Review of Literature

The ubiquitous role iPads play in pedagogy and their effectiveness in teaching and learning is still widely debatable. Many educators around the world are still debating the benefits or detriments of iPad use in education because the line between the two is blurry [6]. Those who oppose the use of iPads in education reduce these devices to technological fetishes in a consumerist society. In her article "Stop Buying iPads, Please," Therese Mageau claims that "a bunch of apps do not count as a curriculum" stating that the incorporation of technology does not necessarily modernize education. Such initiatives require educational reform along with "professional development, new curricula, authentic assessment, and technology [7]". Furthermore, many parents and educators fear that it is also becoming a major source of "digital distraction" in the classroom leading to trouble focusing on tasks [8].

On the other hand, Shuler posits that iPads and other mobile devices can have a significant impact on the reinforcement of the learning experience [9]. When teachers tailored their pedagogical style and syllabus to supplement the use of these devices in the classroom, students' engagement, motivation, and creative exploration increased [10,11]. Furthermore, H. Jenkins argues that digital technologies and social media play an important role in the lives of young people by incorporating their views into "formalized learning" that reflects students' needs and engagement with these technologies [12].

Other educational institutions praised iPads for the decrease in paper use and physical textbooks [13]. In a preliminary study conducted at a private university in Malaysia, Yusup Hashim asserts that participants in the iPad initiative felt more "connected by being online," while spending longer hours accessing their e-learning materials, and socializing with their peers due to "increased activity of interaction in the electronic forums." Thus, the learning experience became more personalized and engaging [14].

However, little research, if any, addressed the issue of the empowering role of iPads in the dynamics of teaching and learning. Morrone, Gosney and Engel suggest that iPads can be a tool of empowerment for both teachers and students as it has been found to increase students' engagement in an innovative and creative learning environment [11]. Nonetheless, the scope of their study is limited to the practical values of the iPad in learning.

This study examines the effect this device can have on young Palestinian learners under occupation to produce a more egalitarian and participatory environment that can empower students to find a shared creative space necessary for a true liberation of the mind.

3. Methods:

This pilot project has been conducted over the 2014-2015 academic year in partnership with DIAK University in Finland, and funded by the Finnish government. The integration of the iPad occurred in the Oral Communication Skills and English for Advocacy courses in the English department at Bethlehem University. In the fall semester, fifty-two English majors received iPads. The students were required to use the iPad to access course materials on Moodle, watch Ted Talks and other videos assigned on their syllabus. In addition, the nature of assignments entailed that the students use certain apps to create videos and various presentational material. One major requirement for the Oral Communication Skills course was for students to record their speeches both at home and during their actual presentation in class, and later to provide a self-critique based on the videos.



In the spring semester, twenty four sophomore students, enrolled in the English for Advocacy course, were asked to use the iPad to produce not only presentations using their app of choice, but also to create digital story-telling videos and devise advocacy campaigns.

4. Discussion of Results:

This study is a part of larger project and the result are still tentative. Our study has shown that students who used the iPad were noticeably more motivated to spend extra time to complete tasks. Congruent with previous research, this study has shown that students challenge themselves aiming to outdo not only their peers, but also themselves. One student said, "I spent long hours locked in my room editing my video projects and experimenting with the different apps the iPad offered in order to challenge myself to achieve excellence." Often times students had to collaborate on projects both inside and outside the classroom, thus, reinforcing team building, self-assertion and a higher self-esteem. Students expressed their willingness to work in groups, and, in most cases, showed better task management and team spirit. The iPad facilitated communication between members using various instant messaging applications such as Facetime. It also made sharing files quicker and easier.

The iPad "promotes movement, circulation, and close-up interactions with students" [11]. iPads allowed our students to take learning outside the classroom setting in cases of repeated suspension of classes, strikes, and closures. Therefore, iPads eliminated the physical barriers characterizing the Palestinian Territories and created a more liberated shared space between students. Moreover, iPads allowed for immediate access to online resources and e-books that were otherwise limited. Most of our students valued the convenience of the flexible reading and writing interfaces using different annotating apps and many expressed their enthusiasm for reading and developed essay writing.

In addition, we noticed that students' performance improved drastically for different relevant factors. Reviewing their videos for the Oral Communication Skills class enabled students' to assess their own progress. These aforementioned factors contributed to a fairer assessment of students and increased student satisfaction of the teacher evaluation.

The iPad also seemed to increase students' creativity. Experimenting with the iPad in our classroom required that we revisit our teaching approaches from a teacher-centered pedagogy into collaborative learning style. This entailed revising our syllabi, redesigning assignments, and reconsidering our methods of delivering information in the classroom. By "thinking outside the box", we allowed students the freedom to respond to assignments and projects with the means they deemed creative and effective. Students' quality of work produced continued to evolve as students became more comfortable with the iPad.

The iPad empowered students to design campaigns that were original in concept and visually appealing, thus, becoming responsible for their own learning, and the producers of knowledge that is now being shared among others. In the example of Randa and Areej who produced the video about the Apartheid Wall, the university's Vice Chancellor, Brother Peter Bray, shows the video in different parts of the world to advocate the Palestinian cause through the eyes of young Palestinians. If this shows anything, it is that this device has given the students a voice they otherwise were deprived of and allowed them to create personalized accounts against the mainstream discourse that obliterates the Palestinian narrative. Our students as "digital natives" learned the value of seeing the world differently, to question the truths set before them, and stand up and assert their being, and their speaking from a place, yes, that is alien to many; however, we as educators should not be silencing them when they can be empowered as speaking subjects.

References

- [1] Jamil Khader. (2015, Jul.) "Denied the Right to Education." *University World News*. [Online]. (375). Available: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20150707004117312>
- [2] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. (1986). *Decolonizing the Mind*. England: James Currey.
- [3] Paulo Freire. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- [4] Munir Fasheh. (2014, Oct.) "Healing From Modern Superstitions." *This Week in Palestine*. [Online]. Available: <http://thisweekinpalestine.com/healing-from-modern-superstitions/>
- [5] Basem Ra'ad. (2010). *Hidden Histories*. New York: Pluto Press.
- [6] Deanna Peluso. (2012). "The Fast-paced iPad Revolution: Can Educators Stay up to Date and Relevant About These Ubiquitous Devices?" *British Journal of Educational Technology*. [Online]. 43(4), pp. 125-27. Available: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01310.x>
- [7] Therese Mageau. (2012, Sep.) "Stop Buying the iPads, Please." *T.H.E Journal*. [Online]. <http://thejournal.com/articles/2012/10/09/stop-buying-ipads-please.aspx>



- [8] M. Richtel. (2010, Nov.). "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price." *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html?_r=0
- [9] C. Shuler. (2009). *Pockets of Potential: Using Mobile Technologies to Promote Children's Learning*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.
- [10] Eugene Geist. (2011, Dec.). "The Game Changer: Using iPads in College Teacher Education Classes." *College Student Journal*. [Online]. 45(4), pp. 758. Available: <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/77305728>
- [11] Anastasia S. Morrone, John Gosney, and Sarah Engel. (2012, Apr.). "Empowering Students and Instructors: Reflections on the Effectiveness of iPads for Teaching and Learning." *Educause*. [Online]. pp. 1-7. Available: <https://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELIB1201.pdf>
- [12] H. Jenkins. (2009). *Confronting the Challenges of a Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. Cambridge, MIT Press.
- [13] Thomas Cochrane, James Oldfield, and Vickel Narayan. (2013). "iPadagogy: Appropriating the ipad within pedagogical contexts." *Research Gate*. [Online]. 7(1), pp. 48-65. Available: http://www.researchgate.net/publication/235633418_iPadagogy_Appropriating_the_ipad_within_pedagogical_contexts
- [14] Yusup Hashim. (2014). "Preliminary Study on Teacher's Use of the iPad in Bachelor of Education Program at a Private University in Malaysia." *TechTrends*. [Online]. 58 (2), pp. 14-19. Available: https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/aect.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/iTech/iTECH_DIGEST_v4n2.pdf