

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE VIRTUAL LEARNING SPACE(S) IN SAUDI ARABIA: A FOUCAULDIAN PANOPTIC APPROACH

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**ABSTRACT:** *In a place-conscious culture where marked spaces define national identity and social order, the move from a teacher-centred educational system to the virtual classroom resulted in re-drawing the map of power relations. From the practices of the early Saudi classroom, the Halaga, with its panoptic circle structure, to the modern school classroom with its carefully-drawn rows and set of disciplinary techniques, the Saudi teacher had always exercised his authority from/as the centre. Yet, the educational phenomenon of the virtual-space-based distance learning has left the instructor feeling 'out of place'. As the setting for the physical presence and the disciplinary gaze is shifted/cancelled in the online classroom, the balance of power has also shifted in favour of the student. This paper explores the hierarchical structure of the virtual space in the not-so-modern Saudi teaching practices and the position of the teacher which has (d)evolved into the power struggles of the 21st century modern 'educational technological phenomenon'. Applying Foucault's concept of the panoptic in educational settings, we posit that the traditional power and discipline the teacher used to claim has been transmuted in the reverse panoptic gaze of the students who are in control of the virtual classroom and its time and space. The invisibility of the students in the current distance learning setting, compared to their visibility as a disciplinary tool in the physical Saudi classroom, poses a serious challenge not only to the teacher's authority, but also to his/her style and methods. On the other hand, some might argue that the students might gain more understanding of a subject via their 'spatial freedom' of the online material access.*

*However, we hypothesize that the virtual space in distance learning needs to be teacher-friendly and visual contact between the teacher and the students should still be applied freely.*

**KEYWORDS:** Saudi Arabia, early Islamic pedagogy, virtual space, virtual classroom, distance learning, Foucault, panopticism, distance learning, spatial freedom.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (hereafter KSA), sometimes called “The Land of the Two Holy Mosques,” is a monarchy with a political system rooted in Islamic Shari’a Law. KSA has a population of over 25 million of which 17 million are Saudis, and the remainder are expatriates. Close to 98% of the people are Arab, and nearly 99% are members of the Islamic faith.<sup>1</sup> Due to the religious and legal framework of the country, which does not provide legal protection for freedom of religion, the public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited. Despite Saudi Arabia’s recent affluence, the influence of Bedouin traditional practices and Islamic religious attitudes continue to be a guiding force in most contemporary Saudi lives. As Quandt argues, “the world view of Saudi leaders is shaped by Islamic and Arab cultures”.<sup>2</sup> Since, according to Islam, humanity’s well-being in the world, and the hereafter, is intrinsically linked to adherence to the tenants of Islamic faith, salvation for the typical Saudi requires an intense devotion to these tenants.<sup>3</sup>

### **The religious foundations of the Saudi state and their impact on education**

Throughout its history, Saudi Arabia has also been associated with a particular version of Islam. According to Buchan, “to this day, the legitimacy of Saudi rule has been intimately linked with the religious and social message of Wahhabism”.<sup>4</sup> Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, theoretically limited only by the Shari’a or divine law which, in its turn,

is shaped by Wahhabism. Since, “the Shari’a is supplemented by a fairly large body of customs, the results are that demands for social change take on a political [and even in some cases anti-religious] colouring”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, many Arabic and Western scholars argue that, despite the country’s strong trade networks with the West, it still remains overwhelmingly Islamic and Shari’a Law prevails in the day-to-day lives of its citizens.<sup>6</sup>

The effect of the strong influence of Wahhabism on education, Michaela Prokop argues, is that

*[t]he evolution of education in Saudi Arabia, the structure of the educational apparatus, and the content of teachings in Saudi schools, in Saudi-financed schools abroad and in the books widely distributed throughout the world, have been circumscribed by the concern to preserve the [state’s] religious foundations.*

These foundations which outline both, the state’s legitimacy / authority as well as the pillars of its educational system, highlight an Islamic view of all knowledge as sacred. For example, the reverence for the teacher/lecturer is deeply rooted in Arabic society as the famous Arabic proverb suggests:

*“He who taught me a letter became my master”*

Jawad cites both the Holy Qur’an and Sunnah to show that Muslims are encouraged to read, write and think.<sup>7</sup> In addition, she shows that foreign knowledge and broader education is encouraged by the Prophet Mohammed who prompted his followers to “search for knowledge though it be in China”.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the concept of University Education as “higher learning” originated in this period with the founding of the great Islamic institutions/universities such as the House of Wisdom. The acquisition of knowledge is, therefore, emphasized as part of the religious duties that a Muslim is encouraged to assume and adhere to. This

association between knowledge and religious duties, as we explain below, will remain central to the history of education in Saudi Arabia for its effects will define the power relations in the Saudi conventional/physical classroom settings.

The respect for the teacher results from his/ her role as a source and a conduit of 'knowledge'. In the Islamic roots of Saudi education, the teacher's identity and status are based on Qur'anic concepts in which the description of *ulama'* (scholars, literally '*the knowledgeable*') and *ahl al'ilm* (literally '*those who have knowledge*') highlights their divinity and allots them a hierarchal position above the rest of the believers. 'Knowledge', from this perspective, is almost always associated with the scholar or teacher rather than being an neutral entity to be pursued by the student. In several places in the Qur'an, scholars are referred to using the passive voice as "those who have been given knowledge", which alludes to the divinity of the knowledge that has been granted to them by God and their distinction as those who have been selected by Him to deserve it. However, *al'ilm* (*the Knowledge*), as it is referred to in Islam's holy book, is not merely an abstract concept that functions exclusively as a sign of distinction. Even though they occupy a "degree" above others, "the knowledgeable" are promised even higher positions by God as He "...will exalt in degree...those who have been granted knowledge." In fact, in the original Arabic verse, the plural "degrees" is used highlighting the hierarchal multiplicity of the positions to which God will raise the knowledge select.

Inside the classroom, education in the Saudi context is based on these Islamic principles which broadly provide the basics of the learning process and the basis of the structure of the institution as well as the unwritten rules that govern the relationship between teacher and student and their respective identities. Some of the effects of such religious foundations which, according to Prokop, always have political implications in terms of the reinforcement of power relations, are that courses, and particularly religious ones,

*place heavy emphasis on rote learning; lessons are very repetitive and often use complex language not always appropriate to the age of the students. This philosophy of teaching inculcates passivity, dependence, an a priori respect for authority and an unquestioning attitude...Interaction between the teacher and his/her students is limited; debate is often absent as the sources of knowledge, the Qur'an and Sunna, are considered inviolable.*

### **Space, discipline and education in the *halagah***

The intersection of the traditional Islamic side of Saudi education and the modern model it utilizes should be scrutinized in order to analyze the virtual classroom and the disruption it seems to have caused of what has been otherwise a constant process of augmenting discipline and maintaining static power relations. Since space is an essential element in the dynamics of education and the central issue in the shift to distance learning, it is important to examine the structure of the *halagah*, the traditional Islamic setting which preceded the modern classroom. The *halagah* serves here as the original site of education in Saudi Arabia and, we argue, it demonstrates how the disciplinary power technologies in the Foucauldian sense had been part and parcel of education in this part of the world even before the adoption of the western classroom setting as a model.

The *halagah*, a word which in Arabic originally means *ring*, is a place, usually at the mosque, where students sit in a semicircular shape around their imam or instructor. The panoptic aspects of the *halagah* arrangement make it a strong link in the consistent application of disciplinary elements that gives the participants in the learning process their respective identities, particularly in relation to space and its division.

The *halagah*, which can be used to describe the equivalent of a course in a specific subject in Islamic traditions, underlines the links between knowledge and its religious divinity through its location as it is usually situated in the mosque. In Islam, the mosque is a space which is regulated through several sets of spatial rules for daily prayers (where the worshippers have to stand in straight rows), during the weekly Friday sermon (where the imam addresses an audience obliged to face him attentively, as a duty) and whenever one is inside it through observing quiet and respectful behaviour. The mosque, thus, lends its space as an *a priori* means of discipline in the learning process which takes place in the *halagah*, demonstrating one of the basic techniques that Michel Foucault highlights as the foundations of discipline: the element of *enclosure*.

Further examination of the *halagah* setting reveals more of the elements that do not only "...make the educational space function like a learning machine but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing and rewarding", as Foucault emphasizes. Sitting right at the literal and metaphorical centre of the ring, often next to one of the mosque's columns, the imam is the most important element of the process and its focal point. The interaction between the imam and the students during the lecture is very limited and the role of the student is simply to learn from the teacher, who is the source and the guardian of knowledge. Every student in the *halagah* faces the imam in a way that does not allow him to be hidden from his gaze at any moment. Thus, the "hierarchized surveillance", as well as the other aspects of the "correct means of training" Foucault outlines as the defining features of concepts of modernism were already present, albeit in a rudimentary form, in the older Saudi learning setting before the foundation of modern schools.

### **9/11 and reform in Saudi education**

Since 2001, following the events of 9/11, Saudi Arabia's schools and universities have been under scrutiny in Western editorials for fostering a mindset of intolerance, and even hostility, towards the West. Thomas

Friedman states that “these institutions deserve much of the blame for fostering anti-U.S. terrorism”.<sup>9</sup> This criticism has even resulted in research into Saudi school curriculum and the content of school textbooks commissioned by the US Congress to examine whether these express fundamentalist and anti-American ideologies.<sup>10</sup> The USA has also started to take a more proactive role in influencing Saudi politics. This is reflected in the 9/11 Commission Report which emphasizes the need to agree “on a common framework for addressing reform in Saudi Arabia”.<sup>11</sup>

In response to external pressure, especially from the USA, a number of reforms in both government and educational systems in Saudi Arabia have taken place, and some of the social restrictions of Wahhabist Islam have been eased or discontinued as part of a modernization movement. With these new trends of reform in education, the new phenomenon of distance learning emerged.

Trying to understand this phenomenon leads us to analyzing it at two levels: the diachronic and the synchronic. The history of education as it is implied in the religious/cultural/political background of Saudi Arabia is interrupted by the essentially spatial shift from the physical to the virtual – a shift that has proved to be more than a minor variable in an historical analysis of learning in this part of the world.

### **The challenge of the virtual**

The shift to the virtual classroom in institutions where centuries-old “technologies of power”, as defined by Foucault,<sup>12</sup> had been deeply embedded was a challenging one from the teacher’s point of view. Such a shift required a new set of technologies that had to do without the very basic principles of the old ones. The panoptic elements of the *Halagah* which were consolidated by the modern ‘means of correct training’ that were part and parcel of the 20th century school structure heavily relied on controlling space. Education took place within a context of power relations that carefully set up a demarcated space where students were

strategically positioned to be observed and disciplined. It was the students' visibility, an effect of space arrangement, which enabled the whole process and maintained the power relations that regulated it. As Foucault argues,

*The 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.<sup>13</sup>*

Our interviews with three distance learning instructors showed two major reactions to the challenges encountered in their respective distance education experiences. At the beginning, we could observe the frustration generated by the difficulties of coming to terms with teaching in a virtual classroom. However, further accounts on the details of the experience revealed an element of suspicion about what they perceived as a disadvantageous position within the process. Even though all three instructors were in principle in favour of distance education, they felt slightly disoriented by the 'reality' of the virtual classroom. From a Foucauldian perspective, such a feeling of disorientation may be considered a result of the disruption of the central principles governing the modern "means of correct training": visibility and surveillance, or what Foucault terms "the spatial nesting of hierarchized surveillance".<sup>14</sup> In the absence of this control of the spatial dimension, teachers constantly found themselves 'out of place'.

**Distance frustration: technology, classroom management and exams**  
Dissatisfaction with the uncertainty that marked different aspects of the process were obvious in the instructors' respective assessments of their performance in several areas, from the minor technical issues, to the more essential ones regarding their authority and identity as teachers. Without the rituals of the physical classroom, one of our instructors was, at the beginning of the course, never sure whether the lecture had 'actually'



started. Despite the basic technical information given to them by the institution and its team of technicians, and in a typical reversal of roles in the virtual classroom, our teachers had to be informed by their students about at least some of the elements of their lectures. Having to take the position of the learner, the instructors found themselves at the receiving end of instructions from the administration, the technical support team and the students. The basic fact that they had actual class room to enter, take a position in and perform within, the teacher's attitude towards their lectures were simply uncertain in the case of one of them, and often irritated in the case of another. Both, the uncertainty and the irritation were strongly linked to the teacher's technical failure to conduct their lectures at times, and to their mistrust of the online programme/system, at others.

As the control over the teaching process had conventionally been inseparable from the utter domination of the classroom space, our instructors seemed to struggle with the possible ways to manage their classes within the temporal dimension alone. For example, in the case of one teacher, it was hard to gain the students' attention as they were simultaneously asking many questions through the chat box. The teacher found herself torn between answering the students' questions and getting them to stop answering each other incorrectly in the chat box. With another instructor, the problem was often dealing with complex points in the lecture through discussion. He complained that not being sure whether the students were shy, not interested, or simply away from their computer often made him feel he was making double the mental effort, never sure whether to move on to the next point or explain the one he was explaining further.

Our instructors also found it difficult to get used to the lack of body language feedback from the students. As students logged in to the classroom and appeared on a list of names on the margin of a screen as either present or absent, the teachers had no way of verifying their level of engagement with the lecture. Constant questions and repeated pleas

for the students to participate were more often than not either ignored or dealt with through replies via the Yes/No icon. Students', especially female students', reluctance to use the microphone made the experience even harder for the instructors who often found themselves "lecturing to nobody", which always felt harder than teaching in the physical classroom.

The concerns of all three instructors about virtual teaching covered also areas such as testing and evaluation. Doubts about the identity of the students in on-line quizzes were consistent with other complaints about the students 'actual' attendance and participation. There were also several other problems with the evaluation element of the process in a system that relies quite heavily on the final exam when the students have to sit the exam in person at the university. According to one of our teachers, invigilating a distance learning final exam was always awkward. Even though space was restored, it was not in the typical temporal order of the learning process where the final exam marked the final meeting in the course rather than the first one as in the case of distance learning students who met their teacher in person for the first time on the final exam day. Despite the fact that the exam was not virtual, in the sense that it took place in a physical classroom, the effects of the virtual rapport between teacher and student were evident in the way the teacher could never guess how his students were doing as he simply did not know who was who in the exam he was invigilating. Back in the more familiar space of the classroom, the teacher on the final exam day still could not perform the "ceremonies" of the exam in a familiar way since his relationship with his students throughout the semester lacked the control of space which usually equips him with authority and most of his disciplinary tools.

Because of these challenges one of the three teachers we interviewed decided never to teach another distance learning course. Faced with ambiguous anonymous complaints, she found it hard to address the problem and solve it. She could not identify the students who had the

difficulty. In one of the complaints, she told us, the student was anonymously speaking for the whole group, but once again, it was hard to verify such claims with the minimal interaction of distance learning students. "I was dealing with phantoms", she complained.

### **The virtual classroom as a 'reverse panoptic'**

Through a Foucauldian analysis of the instructors' suspicions, we would like to propose that the shift in the balance of power relations in the virtual classroom has resulted in a new order that can be viewed as a reverse panoptic structure where fluid space empowers the student and makes the teacher's central position the weakest. The departure from the conventional physical classroom with its "economic geometry of a 'house of certainty'" to the virtual one where space gives birth to the type of "fictitious" relations often generated by the panoptic architecture creates a new kind of panopticon that significantly differs from Bentham's.<sup>15</sup> While the original "panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately", the reverse panopticon that emerges in the online distance education model creates a new kind of virtual spatial arrangement where it is almost impossible to constantly see or immediately recognize the subjects within it.<sup>16</sup> The periphery here is not fixed as an annular building that is "divided into cells, each of which ... [has] two windows, one on the inside corresponding to the windows of the [observation] tower [at the centre]; the other, on the outer side, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other in order to render it transparent for the observer in the tower".<sup>17</sup> It is rather an imaginary/virtual space where the students cannot be located, except through a 'window' that our teachers could not see much through. This 'window' is transparent on the side of the student, but opaque from the perspective of the teacher who can neither recognize nor see the person behind it. "We can't be sure if the student is paying attention to the class, chatting, or playing a video game. We can't even be sure if the students are really there", our first teacher complained.

In this virtual panopticon, the observation tower at the centre is replaced by the teacher's central position of transmitting the lecture from which only he/she can be observed (or ignored) at any given moment by the student. Whereas the centre in the classical panopticon and the conventional classroom serves as the most powerful position occupied by the teacher, it becomes the weakest point in the virtual panopticon where he is trapped in his uncertainty about those at the periphery. Both of our teachers felt that distance learning classes were longer and thought they were less rewarding due to the fact that they "could not see and interact with their students".

While for the one at the central tower in the classical panopticon "invisibility is a guarantee of order", the teacher's nonreciprocal visibility at the centre of the virtual panopticon replaces his authoritative disciplining gaze making him the constant object of the students'.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the original panopticon where "the arrangement of [the inmate's] room, opposite the central tower, imposes on him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility", the reverse virtual panopticon deprives the teacher of the students' axial visibility, as he cannot see them, and empowers the students through their lateral visibility, as they can communicate with one another without his knowledge.<sup>19</sup> One of our teachers suspected that his students were often "active on other windows or chatting with each other using another programme". The students are no longer "a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised", which is the objective of Bentham's panopticon.<sup>20</sup> In the virtual panopticon, they have the opportunity to go back to the kind of crowd that the classical one aimed to abolish: "a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect".<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, an additional level of control makes the virtual panopticon even more complex and challenging for our teachers. The administration joins the students as an observer who cannot be observed. Aware of the administration's full access to every lecture, our teachers exercised a higher degree of self-censorship on what they said and how they said it.

As lectures, according to the regulations of distance learning, must be recorded and uploaded for the students to download, the administration alerted our instructors whenever they failed to activate the recording option. According to our teachers, the recorded lecture option makes them the object of observation and assessment by almost anyone within (and probably from outside) the institution.

## CONCLUSION

Distance learning as a multi-layered system of observation, as far as our teachers are concerned, has made the virtual classroom a reverse panopticon where they are placed in a vulnerable position to be carefully monitored by the administration or totally ignored by the students while they perform in almost absolute uncertainty. In order to counterbalance the effects of the redefinition of the classroom space in distance learning, we suggest reconsidering the element of visibility and its implications about the teachers' as well as the students' ideas regarding their respective roles. Without a new approach towards the position of the teacher and the student within the structure of new power relations which distance learning imposes, we argue that the learning process in Saudi universities might be negatively affected, rather than 'reformed'.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard. Nyrop, and Norman Walpole, *Area handbook for Saudi Arabia*, (Washington: US Govt., 1977).

<sup>2</sup> William. Quandt, *Saudi Arabia in the 1980's: Foreign Policy, Security, and Oil*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2002), p.38.

<sup>3</sup> Ismail. Al-Farugi, *Islam*, (Brentwood, MD: International Graphics, 1984).; Amin. Ahsan. Islahi, *Call to Islam*. Safat: Islamic Book Publishers, 1987. as cited in Hassan. Aldosari, *The influence of Islamic religion on leaning and teaching EFL and languages other than Arabic in Saudi Arabia*. Ph.D. Penn State University: 1992.

<sup>4</sup> James. Buchan, "Secular and Religious Opposition in Saudi Arabia," *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Tim. Niblock (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1982), p. 107.

<sup>5</sup> James. Buchan, "Secular and Religious Opposition in Saudi Arabia," *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia*, ed. Tim. Niblock (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1982), p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> Omar. Al-Rawaf, "The structure of Saudi government," *The Middle East Insight*, 3 (1983): 28-32.; Iftikhar. Ahmad, *Islam, Democracy and Citizenship Education: An Examination of the Social Studies Curriculum in Pakistan*, (Columbia: Columbia University Archives, 2004) <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cICE/Archives/7.1/71ahmad.pdf> (accessed August 08, 2012).; Iftikhar. Ahmad, *Islamic Renaissance: The Real Task Ahead*, (Pakistan: Institute Al-Islam, 1998) <http://members.tripod.com/iaislam/IRTRTA.htm> (accessed August 01, 2012).; Bassam. Tibi, *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).; Bassam. Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism: Political Islam and the New World Disorder*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).; Bassam. Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics*, (New York: Palgrave in association with the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs Harvard University, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Haiffa. Al-Jawad, "Pan-Islamism in the Middle East: Prospects and Future," *The Islamic Quarterly*, 37 (1993): 207-222, p.8.

<sup>8</sup> As cited by Haiffa. Al-Jawad, "Pan-Islamism in the Middle East: Prospects and Future," *The Islamic Quarterly*, 37 (1993): 207-222, p.17.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas. Friedman. "The Saudi Challenge." *New York Times*, February 20, 2002. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/20/opinion/the-saudi-challenge.html> (accessed January 16, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> H. Con. Res 432; cited in S. Karmani, "English, 'Terror' and Islam," *Applied Linguistics*, 26 (2005): 262-267.

<sup>11</sup> John. Sharp, "Saudi Arabia: Reform and U.S. Policy," *Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade Division*, ed. C. R. F. Congress (Washington: The Library of Congress, 2004), p.6.

<sup>12</sup> Micheal. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 170-1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

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