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## Education Technology in Saudi Schools

*Hanan S. Alghamdi*

There is no doubt that technology has proven its effectiveness in different areas throughout history. The positive integrating of technology can be seen in architecture, medicine, and any basic life skills. As educators in Saudi Arabia and all around the world, we are very interested in improving the educational system by adapting and implementing new strategies and ideas. In my article, I discuss the importance of integrating technology in the Saudi schools as it was presented and experienced from my visits and observations of the American schools in Arizona, where technology helps in facilitating the school staff work and students' academic outcomes. This new idea goes along with the Saudi 2030 Vision that aims to solve all the issues in education and to a new and better educational system. Also, I will be presenting my plan of action when applying the integration of technology in the Saudi schools and how we can benefit from it in difficult situations such as the global pandemic of Covid-19.

I work in a small town in the southern part of Saudi Arabia, where everyone seems to know the other. Every morning, all teachers, principals and students rush to their schools expecting a more fruitful and better day than yesterday. I arrive at my small school on the top of a small hill at 6:30 a.m. A first-grade student hugs me as she sees me crossing the front gate and hands me a little white jasmine flower happily telling me that they are finally open in her garden at her home. I open my office window and take a deep breath enjoying the cold breeze and the smell of the trees. I can tell that it was raining late at night from the wet smell of the earth and the mud stuck on my shoes. When the bell rings, all students run to their

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classes, have their tools prepared on the desks, and excitedly check the schedule of the first period. At 7:25 a.m. teachers greet each other, have quick chats in the corridors while holding coffee mugs as they go towards their classes. Then they would start giving their first lessons of the day by 7:30 a.m. After answering a few emails, I start my morning walk-through in some classes. The Arabic language teacher starts with a reading class, they read a section of one of the greatest books for Ghazi Alqusaibi, a Saudi writer and novelist. That's a lot of reading and I can see some students shift their focus and have a sidebar conversation.

I move to the math teacher's class who brings different tools, and students study these tools to answer the worksheet in front of them using calculators while others are very fast to figure out the answer using only the power of the brain. After that I decide to go to science class. She usually takes the students to the science lab and with every student has a laptop, she gives them the opportunity to examine the human body through different situations by using a new application where students are put in action. Well, that is interesting! I approach a student at the corner who uses the application setting to change the weather temperature and increase the body movement then writes down some notes and shares it with the friend next to her. "Do you know when increasing the temperature and the movement the human body cannot tolerate this and will lead to a dehydration?" she says. "Then you should decrease the movement so the body can tolerate longer," her friend replied. There is no wonder that students get high scores in science more than the other subjects because their teacher integrates more technology in her classes, which attracts the students' attention. I go back to my office and think about what I saw in these classes and how to professionally improve the teachers and raise the students' performance.

The Saudi 2030 Vision was first launched by the Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in 2016. The main goal for the vision is to reduce the dependence on oil and improve the country's economy by developing different sectors such as; tourism, health, education, and entertainment. Education improvement focuses on having better educational outcomes, and to help youth hone their skills so they are able to face the future life requirements. It sets different angles of developments, such as: the services and infrastructure, innovation, educators' proficiency, parents' collaboration, integrating technology, education environment, and implementing different curricula. Integrating technology in schools and the ability to use it on a daily basis is one of the main skills all educators must obtain, as we can see the rapid distribution of technology all around the world. If people in charge in the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia would put together a plan for both male and female educators, where they can meet, set together, share and exchange ideas on how to have a good implementation of technology for better educational outcomes, it would eventually match the Saudi Vision. This implementation will not only help the students to improve their academic performance, but also it will create public awareness among the youth on how to use the technology while

socializing with other people. In addition to that, teachers can depend a lot on the technology provided to them by the school to facilitate their work, and replace all or most of the paperwork to be digital for easy access from anywhere and any device. Technology has proven to be important, especially recently, when switching education to mostly online due to the Covid19 pandemic that has impacted the whole world. Therefore, I believe that this is the right time to consider the power of technology for the sake of an improved education.

More specifically, in my action research I discuss the importance of collecting data and analyzing it in order to be able to decide on a solution for a problem that may occur in the educational field, or to set an improvement plan for the school, students, or the parents. Mathus, Sarup, and Nelson (2013) say that data can be used to evaluate the progress of youths in level systems, treatment programs, or for multidisciplinary team meetings. We might need to send surveys to many people, and this cannot be done very easily and smoothly without the use of the technology. Also, lots of online websites and social media networks can be used as tools for learning. Some of them are free sources and students are into them like YouTube and Facebook. "Facebook, supported by the results in the study, can be seen as a useful educational tool for teaching and learning in higher education institutions, especially in terms of providing a platform for interactions and hence facilitating knowledge construction" (Cheng, 2016). Also, regarding students' safety, virtual labs are powerful and guaranteed sources for science students to do experiments and learn the skills needed "a digital-intelligence project aims to help students learn the skills they need to be safe online" (Owens, 2018). As a matter of timing, learning and acquiring certain skills cannot be done only inside the classrooms, but with the help of technology students can extend their learning time wherever they want. There is no limitation to do this since "students who need additional assistance can find the chance to work on more focused programs with additional time as well as students who want to progress quicker can simply choose to do additional lessons" (Oktekin, 2016). Extra classes can be taken online and students can watch different lessons uploaded the YouTube platform.

However, when the Covid-19 pandemic started, and doctors, presidents, and governors demanded social distance, the schools were closed. I could not help but wonder how students were going to proceed with their education? What about all the conferences and the workshops that are supposed to happen? The answer was, simply, to use technology. As a school principal, I was assigned to work at Tech High School in Phoenix, Arizona, during our visit to the United States. The first decision the school principal, Mr. Bryan Reynoso, made was to distribute laptops to all the students to help them with attending classes and doing homework from their homes. The school staff and students were already trained on how to use technology. In fact, technology is well integrated in the school. Almost in every class I attend I can see the teacher and the students are using certain kinds of technology, like laptops, smartphone applications, or smartboards. This incident

makes me realize that as educators, we do not need to be compelled to try new methods, initiatives or tools that might be of great help, but we need to think proactively, take time for training, and take precautions. These experiences inform the changes I plan to make when I return to KSA.

My plan when returning to Saudi Arabia is to support the dissemination of technology in the educational field as part of the Saudi 2030 Vision. Thus, I am going to start by introducing the topic to all educators starting from my superintendent because she is my boss at work, preparing a Google slide presentation showing the importance of using technology in the Saudi schools. At this point, I have to be persuasive in my presentation so they can buy-in to the idea and feel excited to apply it. The next step is to establish different training workshops for all educators. Teachers will have workshops on how to use the proper technology in the classroom, in presenting information, evaluating students, and creating exams. Principals and administration team will have workshops on transferring all the paperwork to an online system. Students should not be excluded from these workshops as they will need to receive one on how to use technology and care for it. When everybody is ready and able to use technology, and with the help of the ministry of education, will come the providing of schools with the gadgets needed, like laptops and Ipads. Some obstacles may occur while implementing, which is normal with any new project. However, we will need to collect data on these obstacles to narrow them down and help find a solution for each one. These difficulties might be lack of staff and students training, shortage of sources, or the fixed-mindset of educators who insist in rejecting the change. All these obstacles can be overcome by having a clear plan, timeline, and most importantly having the belief in its effectiveness.

Education in Saudi Arabia is constantly progressing and developing, and I appreciate all the values that we as Saudi educators try to preserve in our system since we believe in education as a way to a mental and moral growth, and a representation of one's own culture. From this point I will encourage all my fellow educators to have an open and flexible mind and think of technology as a creative tool, liked by the youth, and easy to obtain in order to facilitate and enable the desired educational growth. Finally, to all educators in the United States, your integration of technology in the schools is commendable. I learned a lot from you and I am willing to transfer this new knowledge to the Saudis working in education. Your openness and adherence to your commitments will be the key to success.

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