

Article type

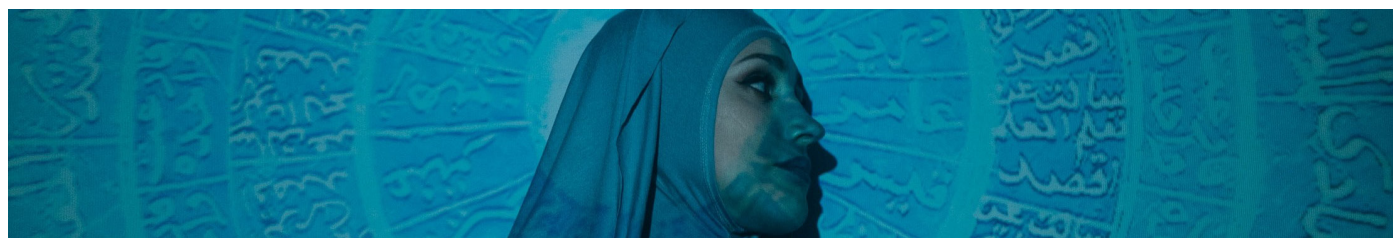
Full paper, double-blind peer review.

Publication history

Received: 27 June 2021. Revised: 25 October 2021.
Accepted: 25 October 2021. Published: 14 March 2022.

Cover image

cottonbro
via Pexels.



Special issue Technology and educational 'pivoting' in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic | **More at** <https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.0a9292af>

To see or not to see; the withering boundaries of invisibility: A novice Kuwaiti tutor's experience of teaching online

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Keywords

higher education; Kuwait;
online setting; feminist research;
autoethnography; feminist
pedagogy

Citation

Al-Ali, K. (2022). To see or not to see; the withering boundaries of invisibility: A novice Kuwaiti tutor's experience of teaching online. **Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning**, 2(2), 197-212.

[https://doi.org/](https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.16fb2902)

[10.21428/8c225f6e.16fb2902](https://doi.org/10.21428/8c225f6e.16fb2902)

Abstract

This paper reports my experience as a first-time online tutor in a Kuwaiti college during the Covid-19 pandemic. Using autoethnography coupled with a feminist approach to research I analyse my experience and the challenges created for me in this new setting. Guided by my interests and tactics, I present the struggle of a novice tutor to manage her course and teach and support her students in what seemed to be a context which blurred the boundaries between face-to-face (FtF) and online settings in a unique way. I also present a narrative of students' tactics, interests, and power which compelled the tutor to change her teaching approach and adapt it in a way that helped sail the students to successfully passing their module. This is a story of what seems to be an emerging context of invisibility (with hidden interests and clash of powers) distinctive of the Kuwaiti online context that materialised by choice and power. Keywords:

1. Introduction

Within the Kuwaiti educational context, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, nothing in practice could be identified as distance, online or remote learning (Al-Ali. 2010). Although a branch of the Arab Open University (based in Saudi Arabia) operates in

Kuwait, Kuwaiti officials only recognised and implemented face-to-face (FtF) education. It was in fact almost a taboo, I believe, to suggest online/distance learning as another educational alternative within the government sector of education. Distance learning was associated with aberrant practice and inability to take learning seriously among other things. In fact, rules concerning (higher) education were modified to assert FtF education and the physical coexistence of learners and teachers (Al-Nakib, 2015). Online learning and distance education were not approved nor accredited by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Higher Education (Albader and Al-Raqom, 2020). (Online) Technology was seen as an aid for FtF settings and not a different offering to education. Such was the case for the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET), the largest higher education organisation run by the government. And although there were some efforts in the past to initiate what officials referred to as e-learning it was approached in the same spirit, to support FtF learning and as a reservoir/site for class material and content, yet all attempts failed for different reasons (Alfelaj, 2016; Alkharang, 2013; Al-Ali, 2010).

Having been personally involved in a number of efforts, committees and e-learning projects representing my College of Basic Education, the largest college under PAAET, it is perplexing how officials' attitude towards online learning *appear* to have transformed, when in the past online learning was demeaned in comparison to FtF learning. But the case is that this form of education is adopted as a quick solution to ensure the continuity of education at all levels during the Covid-19 pandemic (Gulf Center for Studies and Research, 2020). In a sense, the move to online teaching and learning was forced upon Kuwaiti officials at the Ministry of Higher Education. Distance learning and online/e-learning are used interchangeably to label what is being practiced now during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Kuwaiti context. These terms appear to be synonymous with an absence of an official perspective and definition. Currently, they seem to be used to denote the absence of FtF setting and the move to offering the different subjects (according to a fixed timetable) in an online setting with the aid of online technologies and tools. With this in mind, I use these terms throughout this paper.

It is in this context that I address my experience of teaching online for the first time and in the wake of the pandemic. I analyse my experience from a feminist approach to research coupled with autoethnography. Women's experience and issues of concern are of sincere interest to the feminist project and are positioned at the core of a feminist approach to research. At the same time, autoethnography creates a personal space to reflect and narrate my story critically. I pay special attention to power and power-relations between a

tutor (myself) and her women students in order to understand my experience of struggle, fear, and apprehension. I tell my story and express my voice through a narrative that I identify as one of many that could be ascertained. But in this narrative that I chose I am only one of the 30 main characters. This is truly a genuine effort that I underwent to assist my students succeed. It reflects the changes I had to embrace in my approach to teaching in an invisible online context that materialised by choice and power. I do not claim that what I practiced and how I approached my teaching is a full expression of feminist pedagogy, it is though in some respects (valuing women experience and encouraging students' collaborative participation and dialogue), as I explain later on. I am hoping that this paper not only enriches the feminist pedagogical perception of power and power relations in the online classroom but also sheds light on power and power dynamics in a different (Kuwaiti) online context.

I am guided by my main broad question of 'how do novice women tutors experience teaching in the online context for the first time?' I posit this question specifically to understand my experience teaching online within a Kuwaiti context. I suggest these two sub-questions to further help me absorb the intensity of the experience and extricate the learning points and ideas for future encounters:

- How do tutor and student interact in this setting?
- What is distinctive about the Kuwaiti online setting?

In the sections to follow I first set the scene for feminist pedagogy's efforts to go online. Next, I discuss a research approach that couples the feminist stand with autoethnography. Followed by an examination of the context within which my experience occurred. I then present a detailed account of my experience. The last two sections I focus on analysing my story ending with the conclusion.

2. Setting the feminist pedagogical scene

In general, and within the context of the feminist project, feminist pedagogy is considered to be "a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices" (Shrewsbury, 1993, p. 166). It seeks to empower the community of learners to act responsibly towards one another and the subject matter. Feminist pedagogy encourages learners to apply their learning to social action. Experience, participation and dialogue are essential dimensions of a feminist pedagogy, and the emphasis on the creation of knowledge through dialogue and discussion is core (Chow, Fleck, Fan, Joseph and Lyter, 2003). Hence, participation and negotiation are stressed in

the feminist classroom and learners are regarded “shapers of knowledge and learning” (Herman and Kirkup, 2018, p. 785). In fact, Vitello (2017) envisions the feminist online classroom to be a space of conversation and discussion where students develop a strong sense of voice and are encouraged to speak freely. Therefore, feminist pedagogy is considered a vehicle for empowering students’ voices where they exercise control over their own learning (Correa, 2010), and the learning environment is designed so that students find their voices (Campbell, 2002). Consequently, “the importance of activism, critical thinking skills, and open-mindedness” is emphasised (White, 2011, p. 195). For Weiler (2001), feminist pedagogy is “a political project” (p. 46). She explains that through feminist pedagogy, feminist educators are challenging the structure of the traditional canon and suggesting alternative classroom practices. Feminist pedagogy raises awareness of an oppressive social structure that needs to be changed. But what distinguishes feminist pedagogy from other pedagogies that are similar in their quest such as Freirean and critical pedagogy “is its analysis of patriarchy and attempts to develop an education appropriate for women” (Weiler, 2001, p. 47). In fact, critical pedagogy is described as a “‘boy thing’” for its “masculinist voice of abstraction, universalization, and the rhetorical position of “the one who knows,” (Lather, 2002, p. 115).

Feminist pedagogy has contested and multiple meanings (Richards, 2011), therefore instead of finding the *one* definition, feminist educators agree on a number of tenets that characterise it. In a community of learners, students collaborate, and bring their personal experiences (so do the teachers) to the (online) classroom, students learn to connect subject content with their experience (Daniel, 2021). In this community of learners, a number of issues are raised. Such issues concern for example the gendered nature of knowledge in the academy, the source of knowledge and claims of truth, and the authority and power of the teacher. Feminist pedagogy paves way for learners’ different voices, empowerment and consciousness-raising. This vision it seems is built on a presumption that the feminist tutor is a skillful tutor, one who has found her voice and strengths, who is empowered and able to sail the feminist voyage with her students (Al-Ali, 1999). In this vision tutor emerges as *always* powerful, has a voice and is empowered while the student is depicted as *always* powerless, silent and in need to be empowered. The dichotomous basis of power and power relation places enormous responsibility on the tutor to know and work (intentionally and constantly) to achieve the feminist pedagogical goal. In a peculiar way the feminist image of the tutor seems to resemble, in essence, the tutor’s image that emerges from the ‘traditional’ and ‘authoritarian’ Kuwaiti teaching and learning approach, Al-Nakib (2015)

refers to. In this approach, Al-Nakib explains, it is the teacher’s total responsibility to secure the dissemination of information and ensure that students memorise the information in preparation for examination. Both visions posit the teacher as powerful in comparison to the powerless student.

Although Al-Nakib (2015) criticises Kuwaiti general education, higher education is also criticised for being content-focused. But there are serious calls, often individually, of reform moving away from didactics and embracing more progressive and dynamic approaches within higher as well as general education (AlKandari, 2012; Kim, Albeiz, Aburizaizah, Bridges, Fuller and Qutub, 2019). In this vein and with regards to women, some female academics attempt to focus on lived experience in their teaching approach and raise questions concerning women status and gender equality in Kuwait. Dalal Alfares who teaches at Kuwait University claims that her work is based on radical black feminism; she is trying to raise awareness and help students comprehend the multiple constructions of discourses on feminism and gender, while at the same time aiming to establish a feminist framework for women in the Arab Gulf area (Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain) (Alfares, El Khawaga, Darhour, Jad, and Allam (2020) or what Al-Malki (2019) refers to as an authentic “Narrative of Our Own”. Also, Alshammari (2019) approaches her course content making connections to students’ lived experiences. She finds this approach to be essential for building an active learning environment and creating a sense of personal agency. But these remain individual attempts and face students’ resistance. The Islamic perspective that students uphold, according to Alfares, poses a challenge; “students will consistently resist and refer to hegemonic Islamic texts when faced with anything critiquing Muslim hetero-patriarchies” (Alfares, El Khawaga, Darhour, Jad, and Allam (2020). The fact is that “At universities across the [Arab Gulf] region, academics focus on women’s contributions and concerns in their classes as a personal initiative, but a gender perspective is rarely institutionalized” (Lindsey, 2016). It is no wonder then that studies concerning feminist pedagogical approaches with the Kuwaiti context are rare. Within my own courses I tried raising women students’ awareness regarding issues that concern them by making women and their experiences central to class discussions and connecting the content to their lives and realities (Al-Ali, 2021). I refrained from directly criticising, instead I offered the tools for students to see and think about their lives, and those of other women differently. Such tools could be looking at the situation from different angles or forming questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ and ‘what if’. Also encouraging students to decide for themselves asking for example ‘do I need to change...?’ ‘what do I need to change...?’ ‘how do I change...?’. But I was cautious not to use the ‘feminist’ word

as I knew it drew negative feelings.

To reiterate then, by shifting agency to students, prioritising learner-centred approaches, emphasising collaborative and participatory practices in a community characterised by care instead of dominance, feminist educators seem to believe that power structure is dismantled, learners are empowered and emerge as free speakers. This emancipatory vision is built on a binary understanding of the powerful tutor in opposition to the powerless student and it is fixed in a positional status. My current experience did not conform. In fact, there were times that I felt powerless and helpless trying to handle the challenges created for me by my students. Sharing her reflections on forming a virtually feminist pedagogy in her classroom Bond (2019) writes:

I do not believe it is entirely possible to dismantle the power dynamics inherent to binary teacher/student dynamics. However, I do believe there are effective ways to mitigate them. To do so, I prioritize learner-centered approaches via two specific strategies: whenever possible, I shake up tradition, and I shift agency to students. These strategies allow me to remain intentional in my efforts to promote student agency in virtual learning environments.

It is this aspect of the feminist vision (of power) that I aim to focus on in order to understand online power dynamics, as I tell my story and analyse my experience. I have chosen a feminist approach to research not only for their focus on women and their experience but also because of the oppositional stance they represent towards positivism, abstraction, knowledge building and universal truth. Women, their realities and their struggles in this approach are paramount for knowledge creation. Women are therefore social actors, they are constantly engaged in producing and revising meaning through social interaction (Grix, 2018), and that meaning is inherently socially negotiated (Lave, 1991). Accordingly, a qualitative feminist methodological approach coupled with autoethnography is adopted, a view based on constructivism as an ontological position.

I primarily concentrate on the feminist pedagogical online context and literature in order to frame my understanding of the online dynamics of my experience. But I am confounded by the lack of studies and resources specifically in relation to women's (learners and tutors) lived experiences. Although my search using google scholar revealed a number of studies that discuss feminist pedagogical strategies online there is less discussion on lived experience. In fact, Brown (2019) describes its present state as "still in its infancy" (p. 7). This is surprising especially that feminist

pedagogical research is guided by the "major principles of feminist pedagogy such as participatory learning and the *validation of students' personal experiences*" (White, 2011, p. 195, my emphasis). There is certainly a need to fill a gap in the literature especially studies of the lived experiences of learners and tutors alike (Engin, 2017, Brown, 2019). The current situation flags the deprivation of knowledge vis-à-vis online interaction and dynamics; another gap that needs to be filled. In relation, Selfe, Villanueva and Parks (2017) state that "if there are more "voices" being represented, it is unclear whether those voices represent the embodied experiences of our diverse and heritage-rich teaching and student populations" (p. 1). Brown (2019) rightly accentuates that "The absence of current research on online education warrants investigations to facilitate best practices and optimal online learning environments" (p. 7).

While feminist pedagogues and scholars fall short examining women's online experiences the move to online education and learning extends (Chick and Hassel, 2009) and the number of online women learners increases (Aneja, 2017). In fact, Lee (2019) states that online learning is now part of the mainstream higher education with the rapid increase in online learners. Anchored in a face-to-face (FtF) context, feminist pedagogy's movement to the online context is lagging (Bailey, 2017). One reason seems to be the assumption that "the ideal learning environment is one where teachers and students are co-located in time and space" (Herman and Kirkup, 2018, p. 782). This co-location is seen as a prerequisite for the aspired open communication and "enabler of, the kind of experiential learning crucial to feminist pedagogy" (Aneja, 2017, p. 852).

The current situation also reveals the mistrust and prejudice that colour the feminist pedagogical approaches concerning the online context in comparison to Other/face-to-face (FtF) context. The existing studies that explore online feminist pedagogy, few they are, posit FtF pedagogy as the point of reference to which online pedagogy and interaction is measured. Take for example this stark comparison of Chick and Hassel (2009) who write that the 'faceless' solitary nature of online learning and environment means that "in many online classes there are rarely discussions other than what's assigned, no debates, no laughter, no groups sitting together and having heated or engaged conversations about anything" (p. 198). Indeed, "Early scholarly references to CMC described it as inferior to FtF communication" (Soffer, 2010), p. 391). "[C]onstantly compared and contrasted negatively" with FtF, online learning/education is seen as "second best" (Blake, 2000, p. 189). As a result, and more seriously, questions that reflect the doubt feminist pedagogues bear, are posed: "Is it really possible to do online

teaching in a way that remains true to the values of [FtF] feminist pedagogy?” (Bailey, 2017, p. 253). Some scholars admit their failed efforts to *replicate* their FtF classrooms in their online counterparts, hence conclude that “some significant personal and experiential engagement may be uniquely possible in the online realm” (Bailey, 2017, p. 264). The online space is a *different* learning space and requires *different* teaching and learning skills (Campbell, 2002). And some conclude that the on-line world has its own culture (Mahoney and Knupfer, 1997). It is not arduous to deduce then that feminist scholars and pedagogues face a split between the two modes leading to an unresolved binary where FtF context and learning is favoured over online context and learning (Aneja, 2017).

Therefore, I proceed with the awareness that the online context is distinctive, genuine and should be approached as such. That said, I continue next to give an overall view of feminist research and autoethnography and discuss how the two converge.

3. Towards feminist autoethnography; double power

Feminist research is a political endeavour (Alkhaled, 2017), it is premised on the validity of personal experience as a source of knowledge, a kind of inner knowledge (Weiler, 1991). The statement ‘the personal is political’ is at the heart of feminist research, in a clear opposition against objectivity and positivism (Averett and Soper, 2011; Griffin, 2012). In fact, research relations premised on positivism is seen as a situation of dominance (Mies, 1993). Understanding experience means to comprehend the ways social and power relations are constructed and enacted (Chow, Fleck, Fan, Joseph, and Lyter, 2003; Stanley and Wise, 2002). Feminist researchers seek to dismantle the binary structure that prevents the body and mind meeting (Pathak, 2010). Knowledge, in this binary, is treated as *apolitical* with the superiority of the intellectual over the body. According to Michelson (1996), the emotional and the physical being is as informative as the intellect and offer moments of connectedness to the world. By exploring experience and legitimising it, spaces for multiple voices are created. Feminist methodologies speak of multiple truths. They are based on less restrictive, more creative, and more inclusive methods, therefore challenging mainstream research (Ardovini, 2015; Witherell, 2010). In authorising experience, feminist researchers seek to empower and grant voice to the voiceless, particularly women.

Voice is used as a metaphor which implies a strategy to empower and advance ‘horizontal power with’ rather

than ‘hierarchical power over’ (Kenway and Modra, 1992). Here, one model of power as dominance ‘over’ is replaced with another model of power as energy ‘with’ (Liao, 2006; Shrewsbury, 1993). Moreover, the physicality of voice is aspired. Those who speak, and have a voice, are empowered and therefore have the power to change. Those who are silent are seen as powerless and oppressed. As such, feminists’ construction of voice and silence is trapped in an opposition, creating a dualism of a favoured voice compared to a demeaned silence. Consequently, voice is always seen as powerful and silence as powerless (Orner, 1992). This binary structure is simplistic: it evades the interrelatedness of the terms and the complexity of real-life situations and experiences. Feminist critics argue against this binary system (Mishra, 2013; Mohanty, 1988). Instead, they assert the importance of situating individuals socially, culturally, geographically, and historically. That is, women’s local context and trans-local context matter in understanding their experiences and stories (Curnow, 2016).

Pertinently, autoethnography is a methodology that allows researchers to write solely about their own experience (Richards, 2016). Researchers have long been warned of leaving traces of self onto their research track. In the name of objectivity and reliability researchers are denied access to their emotions, feelings, and personal involvement in a project that depletes those same elements. In his narrative, Amundrud (2011) replaces reliability and validity for “*accessibility, verisimilitude, and relevance to other, similar situations*” (p. 335, emphasis in original), as a way to depend on his own subjectivity to decide what is true. For Pathak (2010), autoethnography allows her to make sense of the world she lives in. It also gives voice to her life in a way distinctive to that of the academic world. Pathak talks about the false binary that is created by ‘scientific imperialism’. Challenging this binary, Pathak (2010) asserts that: “To know is not merely an abstract, omnipotent intellectualized process. To know is to engage an experience fully with one’s mind, body, and heart” (p. 4). In this vein, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) state that: “This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others... and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act...” (p. 1).

Claims of apolitical research and knowledge isolate science from the fabric of society and the concerns of people (Shariati, 1988). Witherell (2010) eloquently explains: “we are, at best, coauthors of our life stories. By giving voice to these stories and their cultural and gendered contexts, we stand to gain an awareness that will make us more effective in many dimensions of our lives” (p.68). It is therefore empowering to engage in a process of autoethnography. In fact,

autoethnographic researchers selectively and retrospectively write about ‘epiphanies’ that connect them to the wider culture (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). They use their personal experience as a vantage point to elucidate aspects of cultural experience for insiders and outsiders. Researchers writing autoethnography produce aesthetic and evocative descriptive accounts of their experiences (Tillmann, 2009).

Conversely, autoethnography meets feminist scholarship in many aspects, most importantly in valuing personal experience and considering it a political stand. Autoethnographic research and feminist research connect people to research and knowledge by drawing on experience, contextualising experience, and reconnecting to culture and history. Bringing feminism and autoethnography together offers a “fully human” (Alkhaled, 2017, p. 115) method of inquiry. It is a clear opposing stand against mainstream research. In short, autoethnography coupled with a feminist perspective presents a powerful approach to research and grants voice to the voiceless. Indeed, it is most appropriate to voice my experience and create space for a narrative based on an analysis of power and power-relations. That said I find Robyn Fivush’s work most appropriate for examining my experience and provides a feminist framework for analysing power dynamics. To her work I turn next.

3.1 A feminist theoretical perspective on place and power

Place and power are two important constructs which emerge from an analysis that situates experience in social, cultural, historical and political context (Fivush and Marin, 2007). Place refers to the idea that individuals occupy certain positions within the social context/structure at specific times, Fivush (2010) explains. ‘Place’ “is a dynamic concept; one’s historical, cultural, and situational position in an ongoing stream of human activity is always evolving” (Fivush, 2006, p. 2). Power derives from place, in that certain places are imbued with power, Fivush elaborates, and individuals are situated in particular places within cultural and historical frameworks. In those places, certain aspects of the individual such as race, gender and class are valued in particular ways, and individuals are defined as particular kinds of persons (Fivush, 2006). Thus, they are denied and provided certain aspects of experience and certain ways of knowing. Any change in one’s place changes one’s access to certain experiences and the interpretation of those experiences (Fivush and Marin, 2007). Hence, Fivush (2010) asserts that place determines power and power determines voice. In this view place, power, and voice are interconnected and important analytical factors for a feminist analysis (Fivush, 2006).

Furthermore, Fivush (2010) explains that voice and silence are socially constructed in conversational interactions and therefore, are negotiated, imposed, and contested. To understand voice and silence, local conversations must be understood within cultural and social frameworks that shape life and embrace canonical narratives which are both normative and prescriptive. Situated local experiences conform or deviate from those canonical narratives creating specific spaces for voice and silence. Fivush (2010) argues that as narratives emerge within social interactions, so do certain events, interpretations and evaluations of those events. The telling and retelling seals those narratives as accepted (or contested) evaluative versions of the past. Those individuals who are in roles of power can shape the shared narratives. Shared narratives provide ‘authority to define’ appropriate narrative, and the ‘power to validate’ certain narratives over others. Accepted shared narratives are considered the centre and are given voice while other narratives appear silenced at the margin, and from this standpoint power gives voice (Fivush, 2004; 2006).

Power also emerges from a theoretical analysis that experience is situated within cultural, social, and historical context (Fivush and Marin, 2007). For Fivush (2010), power is dynamic; it is always in process and occurs over time: “power is negotiated, imposed, taken, and given” (p. 90), power is a relational structure. Therefore, voice and silence must be conceptualised within evolving power structures and relations in an ongoing dialectic interaction. There are multiple levels of accepted and contested narratives within a group (Fivush, 2010). They co-exist and influence each other, with the most powerful narrative being the culturally dominant one. Resistance narratives are shared by members of the marginalised groups. These narratives create spaces for shared history, and challenge dominant narratives. As such, marginalised groups are “speaking through silence” (Fivush, 2010, p. 93), and in this way silence can be powerful. By establishing their resistance narratives, marginalised members are telling their stories from their own perspective and maintaining control over them.

To sum up then, Fivush’s feminist framework is suitable to guide my experience; it accentuates that place, power and voice interconnect in a dynamic way. When we view ‘place’ in the light of distinctive experience and social interaction, and when we focus on how the boundaries and transitions are encountered and defined, then we are able to unfold how dominant narratives are normalised and become the standpoint of participants in dominant places. By the same token, we can also see how marginalised narratives are narratives of resistance that are disclosed in a powerful way.

I intend to study my experience in this light in the sections to follow.

4. Contextualising my experience

Taken by the Covid-19 storm the move to the online setting was the only option available to the Kuwaiti educational officials to ensure the continuity of education at all levels – schools and colleges for both the government and private sectors. The stability of education was a top priority and for it the Kuwaiti Ministry of Education worked closely with the Ministry of Health. The higher education college where I work, College of Basic Education (CBE), like all other colleges and institutions under the Public Authority of Applied Education and training (PAAET), followed in the footsteps and the transition to distance/remote teaching was compulsory and instantaneous. Education in all PAAET colleges and institutions is free and segregated, there are two of each college, one for men that mirrors the college of women. Faculty members can teach in both colleges (men and women). I chose to teach at the women's college only. CBE caters for all Kuwaiti students of the different backgrounds that meet the criteria of admissions, mainly the results of high school diploma. Students enter the college at around 18 years old. They are accepted in the different fields and have to follow a fixed credit programme, according to the department they chose. Students graduate with a Bachelor of Education in their field of study in 4-years-time. Students who successfully graduate become teachers of the different subjects at (primary) schools or employees of other teaching services such as educational technologists. Some pursue different careers.

A training programme for faculty members as well as students was set for the move online. During the first phase of the training plan, which started in June 2020, all staff members were trained to use Microsoft Teams (MT) platform for teaching and were awarded certificates for it, including those who were on sabbatical leave like myself. All students (men and women) were trained during phase two, July 2020. The plan was to resume teaching during the first week of August 2020 in order to conclude the second term, which was interrupted by the pandemic and the three-months lockdown of March 2020. A (special) Summer term was to follow. This plan pushed the first term of the academic year 2020/2021 to start in December. I returned to teaching in December 2020 having been away for a year.

I was mostly concerned about my technical ability in using the platform. But managing MT proved to be straightforward and I encountered no difficulties as the term

progressed. I was also a different person coming back to teaching; as a victim of Covid-19 which traumatised me for many weeks, and as a sole carer of a three-months old infant (20-months old now) I was apprehensive that my sleepless nights and exhaustion might affect my enthusiasm and ability to teach online especially that it was my first experience. I was wrong. My life turned into a space of/for stories I could share with my students some of whom are caring for infants or toddlers. I was eager to start, I had enough time to carefully choose the content and think about the methods of teaching and assessment procedures of my courses, I thought I was ready for December 13, but I had a major setback. All three courses I was supposed to teach were cancelled because of the low number of students enrolling, I was told. Through MT I reached out to my departmental colleagues explaining my situation and suggesting that we could create a discussion channel (private chatroom) for solving the difficulties we might face in teaching online. I had no response. Two weeks behind in teaching, I was replaced with a totally different timetable and modules. I was anxious, with no online teaching experience to fall back onto, I was all alone, and I had no time to think and design my courses, so I learned to think, respond and apply as I went along. I learned to shift gear and change my teaching approach according to circumstances. I followed what could be identified as an 'adaptable' teaching approach.

In the following section I report my experience of one of the courses I taught. I use the journal that I kept throughout the term in which I briefly recorded the progression of events, my feelings and frustrations, and the questions that bewildered me. My life circumstances did not allow me to constantly write, therefore, I was selective as I was brief at times. The journal in this paper is used for verifying the progression and a reminder of events and a stimulator for my recall. I also depend on my memory, since the events occurred recently, as well as the module online posts and discussions. Students' approval and consent to use all information regarding the course and their interaction online was sought. All names I use in my story are pseudonyms.

5. My story: 'One is all it takes' – unceasing struggle

I sighed as the last day of the course concluded; it had been a tiring and time-consuming term which I did not expect. I did not expect it to end the way it did, but I was pleased. On the last meeting I thanked my students and wished them well when one student said: "one last thing, we have something for you, go on students open your microphones!", and I heard clapping. Taken by surprise but feeling

like a winner; I thought that is an (online) image I will not forget. I can proudly announce now that I have a toddler's first step of teaching online with the blessings of my students. But it had not been an easy journey, in fact it was a struggle from end to end. Let me start from the beginning.

One of the courses I was assigned to teach is a module titled 'Educational Systems Design'. This is a compulsory module for computer major students in their third and fourth year. I had 30 students in this class. It had been a while (many terms) since I last taught this course in a face-to-face (FtF) setting. The departmental booklet of the different courses our department offers detailed description of the module; the objectives, the content, the assessment procedures and how the final grade is calculated but leaves some space for change. I had only two days to prepare course description and content timetable and decide on assessment methods in order to share with the students on our first meeting. My old notes and PowerPoint slides were useful. I read through the different resources and refined the content to fit the number of weeks left (around 8 weeks). This class met for 80 minutes twice a week. I felt content; I felt ready, and I had a future vision of the course that I have created in such a short time, so I thought. I posted a welcome note and uploaded course description and timetable plan for the module and invited students to respond through MT.

The term prior (and during my sabbatical leave), a letter from the Dean's office (Dean of College of Basic Education, personal communication, September 8, 2020) was circulated which clearly *prohibits* using cameras during synchronous class meetings. Staff members "are not to ask students (males and females) to open the cameras during class meetings due to some *problems female students experienced* in the past and during the application of distant learning" (my emphasis). Many Kuwaiti newspapers published the content of the letter without explaining the reasons for this demand. But I learned, asking some staff members, that students complained to the dean of the intrusion the cameras had on their lives. I entered the first class-meeting intentionally asking my students of their opinion toward the camera, unanimously they requested to remain 'unseen'. It was also pivotal for me to be 'unseen/invisible'; it suited my life circumstances as it was for the students. Indeed, it was a privilege that, I thought, should not be restricted to students. I seized the opportunity and laid my rule: "*if I cannot see you then you cannot see me*", I added, "*if you are visible, I will be visible too*". They all agreed raising their hands, and accordingly all our class meetings were held with cameras turned off. This kind of 'invisibility' proved to be liberating and convenient. And as time went by it became a realisation of anchoring

a solid boundary between the private and the public; not entirely due to gendered customs and inappropriateness of showing Arab female faces (online), as Hurley (2021) suggests, but a tactic intended to shield the private life from the gaze of others (females and males).

In this first meeting I invited the students for a glimpse into my private life and my new responsibilities of being the sole carer of my infant grandson. I learned that some of my students raised small children or cared for other family members and some ran businesses on the side using Instagram accounts, initiated during the pandemic. Some had no private spaces of their own and attend online sessions with family members around them. I also learned that some shared the one computer available with their siblings while having to decide whose turn it was to miss class in order for the other to attend. The complexity of these young women lives is astonishing yet their insistence to pursue learning is admirable. One student wrote explaining her low performance on the exam "have you ever envisaged someone sitting in an online session with her infant in her lap and has all responsibilities of managing a household?" "I am one", I replied. This similarity of life circumstances brought me closer to the women students; I understood what they endured and therefore I tried to create other (more) possibilities for them to accomplish the module's objectives and raise their grades. In fact, as the module progressed those women's lives were further anchored in my memory. I knew Huda who shared the one laptop they owned with her siblings, at times had to miss the online meeting because of it. Also, Fatima who spoke little but had the household responsibility and looking after her younger siblings, when her mother was unable to return to Kuwait, because of the rules surrounding Covid-19 situation. And May, who looked after her chronically ill husband and often asked for extensions, yet excelled in her work. I had 30 stories for my 30 students.

The successive online class meetings with the students revolved around discussing the content of the course. For that I prepared my slides and discussed the ideas the same way I usually did in a FtF setting. What occurred online regarding the process was an adaptation of what used to occur in my FtF classroom. The challenge I faced was related to searching for online examples to illustrate the concepts we were discussing. I had to consciously disengage myself from FtF instances and think of online exemplars. The following day I uploaded PowerPoint slides on MT. In addition to advising students to attend the regular synchronous meetings on time they were urged to promptly form small groups of 5 students to work on the team project and identify a title for their group. To encourage students to connect their experience to course content, I chose it (my experience

of distance learning) as a title for students' team-project. Team-project was the heart of the module, it was the applied version of what was discussed in theory. The plan was to run theory and practice concurrently. That is, to apply what we discussed during synchronous lectures/meetings in theory to the present online learning system that was created and applied for students. As such students' experience became the starting point. I formed a new team location and titled it 'free speech'; six channels (private chatrooms) were added in order to create a private space for the six student-groups to discuss their work. In other words, we had access to an official Team location that was created by the IT department for our module, and a private Team that I created for my students to freely discuss their opinions, thoughts and projects.

My past experience of teaching this module, Systems Approach to Instructional Design, in FtF setting reminded me of the difficulty most of the students undergo, and the effort and constant discussions and explanations that take place to assist them feel and work through the concepts and apply them in real life situations through group projects. I ignored this experience and suppressed my feelings and went on teaching the module the same way I did in FtF setting. In brief, I relocated my previous FtF practice behind the screen. In doing that I seem to have imitated how some feminist pedagogues approach the online setting *replicating* their FtF efforts in their online classrooms (Bailey, 2017).

Although students were regularly asked to use their private channels for their textual discussions around their projects, three weeks on since their creation, students failed to use the online space. Despite my constant encouragement, students remained silent. I confronted their silence in a lengthy post wondering whether assigning a grade for the virtual discussion would compel/motivate them. At last, one student responded and assured me that they were not using WhatsApp to communicate or any other means. She posted: "we understand everything so far, each one of us knows what she is doing, I know I do, and that is why we have nothing to discuss". 'How can I encourage them? What else can I say?' I pulled the last straw and said: "Discussions are important particularly for this module because it enriches your ideas and allows you to see things differently and from others' perspectives and this is why I invite you to take part in discussions". From there on the team (Free Speech) developed a sound/(voice), at times it reflected a high interaction and others remained low. In hindsight, I succeeded in *forcing* students to talk without having to use incentives. My persistence and demand for their visible voice was fruitful but created a 'situational dilemma/impatience' for me. On one hand I wanted the students to feel free discuss-

ing their projects and any other related issues, and on the other hand I felt it was my duty to stimulate their discussion. I was anxious about time limit and falling behind and as a result, it seems, I stripped them off of *their* responsibilities of engaging in their projects and *choosing* the 'right' time for them for that engagement.

Students' projects revolved around their experience of online learning using MT. They were asked to evaluate their experience since August 2020 and use that experience as the platform to design an online learning system suitable for them applying the basic steps we discussed in our synchronous online lectures. Although students shared their experience of learning online and expressed their views in an assignment as well as in their Free Speech Team, they were unable to pursue their projects and the module seemed to be at a halt. And during synchronous meetings students refrained from raising questions regarding their projects. But they requested samples of previous projects in order to understand how to take their assignment further. This request was initiated by one particular student, Hajar, and other students followed. Despite my continuous explanation that no previous work was available and that their work is going to be future examples for other students, Hajar insisted (while others withdrew). She posted on the official channel for the module, the general channel of 'Free Speech' that I created, and privately through personal chat, expressing her need to see a sample work. Her assertion was aggravating, yet it acted as a warning. I saw her persistence, her repetitive postings, a challenge to my authority and I was unable to delve into other possible meanings. I was unable to see what could have been a plea for help, for wanting to fulfil the course requirements and responsibilities successfully. I expected Hajar and other students to search for resources and examples online which I bluntly posted. My vision of an easy executed plan for the module was gradually disappearing, my (FtF) design was crumbling. With it my image as the skillful knowledgeable tutor was also collapsing, I felt. I was facing a real problem I was unprepared for and did not know how to deal with. Five weeks left for the term to end, I decided to follow a different plan and was adamant it worked. I had no other alternative.

Concerned, troubled and fearful I decided to divide the main project/assignment into a number of mini assignments (tasks). Each detailed task revolved around part of the learner's online experience, and was related to a step in the model we were applying for online learning. In each task students were impelled to think of their experience of online learning in order to fulfill the task. They were urged to discuss the assignment and explore different ways to fulfil it in their assigned groups. They were also advised to

post their questions and comments for the whole class if they found it necessary. But each student was responsible to produce her own solution to the task. When one task was fulfilled another task was uploaded. Each task was marked and graded, and each student received a detailed feedback on how to improve it. Within around three weeks (7 class meetings), five mini tasks were accomplished. The last remaining 3 meetings, students spent on discussing the final group-project; designing an online learning module based on their experience. As such, each student had access to other members' personal experience of learning online. With five examples of each step of the design model available students had a pool of choices to select from, modify and improve. Finally, each group produced a design model of online learning that suited them - a collective jigsaw puzzle design which consisted of a piece from each student experience.

6. Discussion: To see or not to see; celebrating a dominant narrative of invisibility

I am aware that the story presented above is one partial face of the whole online experience. It was extracted to convey my earnest efforts to conclude the module successfully both for my students and myself. I use Robyn Fivush's theoretical framing of place and power to understand the dynamic interaction online. With the dearth of online skills, experience and time I had no other alternative but to reproduce online the only thing I knew, my FtF design. This experience as it is narrated raises a number of concerns, but I will follow two; one is *the immersion in an online context of invisibility*. Invisibility (to be physically unseen) in this case is a conscious intentional convenient choice. All women students in my class online asked to remain unseen. But not all shared similar circumstances as their peers. And although few were comfortable showing their faces they too voted for invisibility (perhaps) in appreciation of others' life circumstances. Students' 'places' within the social structure defined certain aspects of their experiences; some were married, others were raising children, yet others were caring for elderly relatives, while others shared their physical space with their siblings. These life situations (outside the academy) could not be ignored and were pivotal elements students used to force 'invisibility'. In contrast, and in a FtF setting 'visibility' is the norm; it is a 'canonical narrative' which is transferred to the online context through MT synchronous class-meetings. But a new narrative (of invisibility) was in the making solely by students – a narrative supported by students' places and lived realities/experiences. In this context then, students' places are places of power. These students did not need a skillful tutor to empower them; they knew what

they wanted, they acted accordingly, and they succeeded in creating a narrative that suited them.

I have understood students' reasons to be unseen, I myself shared some of those reasons. Indeed, I was all for an invisibility, for it I imposed my rule '*all invisible or all visible*' knowing that women students will choose the former. I then revealed one aspect of my life that I shared with some of them, raising a child, hoping that this exposure will bring me closer, will weaken the institutional boundaries of identities of being a student and a tutor. I was aiming to be one of them, seeking appreciation of a hidden side of my private life that might affect my performance in public as a tutor. Upon reflection I seem to have used my place and exercised my power, guarded my interest and enforced a situation in my favour, masked by a recognition of women students' lives. And by doing that I seem to have refined the new narrative of invisibility made by the students and for the students to include me, the tutor. Invisibility was a privilege for the students, I made it mine too. Consequently, invisibility became the norm, a *dominant narrative of invisibility for all*, in my classroom online. As a tutor and an individual in a role/place of power I shaped the shared narrative of invisibility to my favour by validating a certain narrative (invisibility for all) over the other (invisibility for students only) (Al-Ali, 2020). Shared narratives provide 'authority to define' appropriate narrative, and the 'power to validate' certain narratives over others (Fivush, 2004; 2006). A narrative of visibility was rewritten to a narrative of invisibility for students, to be refined further to a narrative of invisibility for students and tutor. Within the Kuwaiti context, these women students seemed to seek the validation of their private lives and circumstances by attaining invisibility, and so did I.

Further, I chose, and so did my students, to shield our lives drawing a solid boundary between what is private and what is public by executing a conscious plan to transition from visibility to invisibility. Yet this solid boundary withered as we were at ease revealing those private lives in our invisible synchronous and textual discussions. In other words, while visibility was seen as exposing publicly what is private, invisibility allowed the public and the private to meet in the online context. This solid boundary also faded unveiling aspects of those private lives for late assignment submissions, poor performance on exams, inability to participate in discussions, absence or late attendance, or ending the synchronous meeting short. Often students integrated those private lives within the pedagogical context in a compelling way to reveal how their (private) lives outside the online setting affected their lives inside the online setting. There is a consent that "adult learners' everyday access to online HE is bounded, or restricted, by their local and real-life condi-

tions—which exist outside formal online HE environments” (Lee, 2019, my emphasis; also see Callahan, 2013). The Kuwaiti dynamics show a possible way how these ‘restrictions’/lived experiences are pedagogically manifested. It also reveals how our lives outside the boundaries of formal education matter and are connected to our lives inside those boundaries.

Another issue that is raised for me concerns *the uniqueness of the online settings*. This experience is my first to enter the virtual space as a tutor. Not only did I not have enough time to think about the module I was going to teach online (as explained earlier), I had no skills and no support. Consequently, I replicated my FtF classroom in the online setting; mainly, lectures during the synchronous meetings, enriched by discussions and questions and answers, and a module group project. I have learned that to blindly apply an alien (FtF) pedagogical approach to the online setting is erroneous. Had it not been for Hajar’s insistence asking me to provide samples for the project, I would have not (perhaps) pursued a different path. In fact, her powerful determination singlehandedly changed the progression of the module. It made me cautious and alerted me not to ignore her (public) posts. I had to promptly think of other means. This play of power between the female student and the female tutor, is noteworthy. If it highlights anything it certainly accentuates that power is not a product nor an object to possess (Mohanty, 1988). It is undoubtedly not fixed to authority figures or places of authority. Those who are at less authoritative positions/places exercise power in their own way and as they see appropriate (Al-Ali, 1999). Fivush (2010) rightly emphasizes that power is dynamic; it is always in process and occurs over time: “power is negotiated, imposed, taken, and given” (p. 90); power is a relational structure.

Hajar could have kept silent as she did previously (and so did the rest of the students). But an extended silence was not a choice and may not have worked on its own. It was through her insisting voice of dissatisfaction and need (when others retreated) that she fulfilled her goal. The interplay between silence and voice reflects Hajar’s awareness of when to be silent and when to be vocal. I, on the other hand, could have dismissed her voice, but I did not. The challenge that was created for me I took as part of my responsibility towards my students. In a sense, a pedagogical possibility was created as a result of seeing students’ positions not as oppositional rivals or individuals carrying other names of dismissal (lazy, ignorant) but as *eager learners* rightly pursuing their learning paths. Indeed, this interplay (of power) between student and tutor reflects how narratives are negotiated and rewritten within the different places people occupy in the social interaction (Fivush and Marin, 2007).

It also tells me that there are multiple levels of accepted and contested narratives within a group, they co-exist and influence each other (Fivush, 2010). In this case a resistance narrative (of publicly asserting her position) is what Hajar imprinted which in essence challenged the canonical (FtF) narrative replicated and reproduced by the powerful tutor (De Hertogh, Lane and Ouellette, 2019). It is important to note that the interplay between resistance and dominance underline a structure of power that is relational and evolving in an ongoing dialectic interaction (Fivush, 2010).

My failure to replicate the FtF classroom accentuates for me the distinctiveness of the online setting. The online space is a *different* learning space and requires *different* teaching and learning skills. The doubts feminist pedagogues express, and their failed efforts of replication should, in my view, lead the way to a pedagogy unique to the online context – one that does not stand in opposition to a FtF pedagogy but informs feminist pedagogical practice online. To be able to do that it is imperative that researchers waive their preconceptions and biases in order to approach the online context and environment as legitimate and allow this uniqueness to emerge. And although in my case it seemed I had no other choice but to replicate, I was flexible and open to learn. I seized the challenge presented and appropriated it to our (students and tutor) advantage by adopting a flexible/adaptable teaching-learning approach.

This experience is a representation of the *specificity* of the online context. A unique invisible online setting of our (students and tutor) making contained and directed our online interaction within the Kuwaiti context.

7. Conclusion

I started this paper with a main question that allows me to explore my experience of teaching online for the first time and during Covid-19 pandemic. Pursuing a feminist approach to research coupled with autoethnography allowed me to unravel some important issues distinctive to the Kuwaiti context, the tutor, and her women students. A context characterised by invisibility (not to be physically seen) online is favoured by women students and tutor alike during synchronous class meetings. For us (students and tutor), invisibility was nonnegotiable; it created a solid boundary that shielded our private lives from the gaze of others/intruders. Nonetheless this boundary withered in our interactions mainly textual, where the private and the public met. Our context was also distinctive for being a terrain of struggle and power clashes that did not seem to abide exactly to feminist argument on power, voice and place

interconnectedness. Students and tutor occupy different places within the dominant narrative of the institution, but it is not always the tutor who emerges as the powerful. In fact, different narratives are at work and in conflict. My experience presents a narrative of resistance (through one student's power and voice) that shifted the progression of the module to students' favour. This accentuates that *the construct of power is relational, evolving, shifting and fluid* wherever actors (tutor and students) are positioned within the social interaction online.

On another level, this experience showed me how important it is to take into consideration students' lives when approaching teaching and learning situations. In fact, by pressing for invisibility women students seemed to press for connecting their lives outside formal education online with their lives inside it. An adaptable/flexible approach may be one way forward where lived conditions are accommodated and learning possibilities are created. The online setting emerges as unique and has its own culture and unless we invest effort into understanding that culture any efforts of replicating the known and the familiar (FtF) are deemed a failure. In relation, this experience presents an opportunity for further investigations and studies that focus on lived experiences online to enhance our perception of the online environment and interaction, and even design. Within the Kuwaiti context and prior Covid-19 remote, distance, or online teaching and learning was not practiced. This is a valuable possibility that presents itself to seriously think about, maintain, and build upon the lessons accomplished so far practicing online learning.

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Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude to all women students in my class who were generous and allowed me to use their stories in this research paper. I wish them success in their current and future modules. I also like to thank my reviewers for their incisive feedback on the original draft.



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Khadija Al-Ali teaches at the women's College of Basic Education, the Department of Educational Technology in Kuwait. Her current interest is in feminist pedagogy and research within online context. The concept of silence/voice is of most concern to Khadija at the moment. This concept is firmly situated in a particular dominant narrative. Khadija is interested in investigating (an)other narrative(s) that challenges and resists a single institutionalised portrayal of silence/voice. To do that, Khadija is examining the construct of silence/voice from a dialogically extended mind perspective. By joining efforts with feminist pedagogy, Khadija is exploring the possibility of constructing silence as a visible tool of a dialogically extended mind. Khadija is also a member of the Centre of Technology Enhanced Learning, Lancaster University.

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