

Chapter 75

Digital Literacy Instruction in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses the American military's purchase of a \$5.6 million contract to supply the National Military Academy of Afghanistan with laptop computers as the occasion to investigate the complex and overdetermined intersections of digital, administrative, and literacy technologies. These intersections and the challenges they produced for the author as a Western mentor working with Afghan postsecondary instructors in ESL and digital literacies reveal the problematic homogenizing Western economic and cultural assumptions and the intense naturalization of administrative technologies that accompany the denaturalized use of digital and textual technologies in global contexts. The connections of those challenges to recent scholarship in rhetoric and composition highlight the limitations of that scholarship's conception of political economy in a global digital context and also offers new possibilities for imagining hybrid multilingual digital literacies on a global scale.

INTRODUCTION

When I was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan, one of my West Point English Department officer colleagues trained me up on the required protective gear and body armor. Another officer, a Lieutenant Colonel from Physics and Nuclear Engineering, briefed me on the benefits I would receive, to include what the Army calls danger pay. "It's good money," he said. "But it's not worth your life." He was right: there is an incommensurability there. For the Afghan instructors I worked with, their jobs were in some way worth their lives: it took considerable bravery for them to allow other Afghans to know they worked with Americans. It took considerable bravery for a female medical student to go to school at the National Military Academy of Afghanistan (NMAA) when she knew she risked being sprayed in the face with acid, or for a female interpreter to work with the NMAA mentor team after being called a "whore for Americans" by students from the far provinces. What, then, is an income or an education worth?

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A second way to ask that question: in Kabul, after a series of back-and-forth emails, the academic advisors, the training branch, the contracting officers, and the education contractors arranged a face-to-face meeting at Camp Eggers. The Afghans who stood to benefit from the projects discussed in the meeting were not included. For the most part, Afghans seldom do business by email. The Western mentor team held the meeting on the second floor of a building constructed out of transmodal shipping containers. We sat in a semicircle in plastic chairs and discussed the relative merits of the various graduate programs the Afghan instructors might attend, as well as the English-language literacy programs, and how much it might cost, and we talked about funding TOEFL prep programs. TOEFL, the Test of English as a Foreign Language, is one of the primary assessment tools for Afghan literacy instructors. We discussed the debate over using literacy in English as an L2 or second language bridge language rather than performing L1 native language literacy education in Dari or Pashto and then moving to L2 literacy. We performed the immaterial labor of putting together literacy education contracts without involving any of the Afghans in the administrative apparatus that we were planning for them.

This chapter examines how that administrative apparatus formed and forms a significant but often invisible component of digital literacy instruction, and how its constituent technologies when taken in conjunction with the inextricable technologies of language literacy and digital literacy are deeply imbricated in the cultural, religious, and economic systems of local cultures even as those cultures are linked to or alienated from global cultures by those very technologies. Computers as technological objects, through their links to administrative technologies and technologies of literacy, can serve to reveal those often previously invisible links as points of disruption.

BACKGROUND

In 2011, I was a civilian assistant professor at the United States Military Academy at West Point. I deployed to Afghanistan in January and returned in June of that year, as a member of an advisor team with the mission of helping the Afghans to build their postsecondary National Military Academy (NMAA) into what President Karzai has called in public appearances the “crown jewel” of higher education in Afghanistan. While I understand that anecdotes are not equivalent to evidence, part of my method in this chapter is to use the particularities of individual experience in order to attempt to avoid the totalizing essentialisms and reductive binaries often enacted by Western scholars engaging other cultures (see, e.g., Hofstede, 2001). Our advisor team was constituted under the National Training Mission—Afghanistan (NTM—A) as a part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). We stayed at a base on the ISAF military side of Kabul International Airport, again in those steel shipping containers—my shared room was 9 feet wide by 17 feet long, with a window on one end and a door opening into a hallway on the other. To get to NMAA, the team would take two soft-skinned vans and two up-armored SUVs and drive for about 20 minutes around the perimeter of the airfield over to the Afghan military side, and would pass through four guarded security checkpoints in order to arrive at the complex that formerly served as the Soviet-built Air Academy. Those security checkpoints were guarded either by ISAF forces—Belgians when I was there—or by Afghan National Army soldiers. However, ISAF does much of its work by contracting Afghan and foreign vendors to provide nation-building and security services, and in fact, the ISAF presence distorts the local economy: the best-paying jobs go to the English- and computer-literate Afghans who can work as interpreters with the ISAF forces, to the point where government interpreters earn about \$665 per month, while government doctors¹ earn about \$220 per month. Many of Kabul’s

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