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Professor Mahmoud A. M. Al-Qaysi

College of Arts-University of Baghdad

Lecturer Mawaheb Adnan Ahmed

College of Arts-University of Tikrit

* Corresponding author: E-mail :

mahmoud.mahmoud@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iqmawahebadnan@tu.edu.iq**Keywords:**

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E-mail

journal.of.tikrit.university.of.humanities@tu.edu.iqE-mail : adxxxx@tu.edu.iq

Digital Teaching of Medieval European History in Iraq

A B S T R A C T

The experience of CoA of UoB and TU of the digital learning has opened the new aspects in the field of education and culture. The pandemic challenge led the Iraqi higher education institutions to response through enhancing the technology and providing the facilities in all Iraqi universities to switch to the digital learning and applying the mixed learning after some response to the pandemic at the end of 2020. The preserving of the quality of the education through the digital learning is the great challenge of the Iraqi institutions. A study shows that "E-learning has become quite popular among the students all over the world particularly, the lockdown period due to the Covid -19 pandemic"¹.

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"تدريس تاريخ العصور الأوربية الوسطى رقمياً في العراق"

أ.د. محمود عبد الواحد محمود القيسي /كلية الآداب - جامعة بغداد

م.د. موهب عدنان احمد /كلية الآداب - جامعة تكريت

الخلاصة:

البحث محاولة لدراسة تجرّبيتي كلية الآداب في جامعتي بغداد وتكريت لتدريس تاريخ العصور الأوربية الوسطى الكترونياً. ويركز البحث بشكل أوسع على تجربة جامعة بغداد التي يعد تدريس التاريخ الأوربي الوسيط فيها ذا جذور قديمة ترجع إلى خمسينات القرن العشرين. وقد ترسخ هذا الحقل بوجود عدد من المتخصصين مثل المرحوم الدكتور عبد القادر أحمد اليوسف والدكتور فلاح الأسدي والدكتور محمود القيسي. وقد امتدت هذه التجربة إلى جامعة تكريت من خلال كلية الآداب. بتدريس هذا الحقل لطلبة

الدراسات الأولية والعليا. يحاول البحث تتبع هذه التجربة وأهم المعوقات التي تواجهها. ومن أهم نتائج هذه التجربة تدريب الطلبة (الأولية والعليا) على الإفادة من التسهيلات الرقمية لتطوير مهاراتهم العلمية والمعرفية، لاسيما وإن استخدام التكنولوجيا الرقمية من خلال كوكل كلاسروم وزوم والبرامج الرقمية الأخرى يتيح للطلاب والأستاذ الوصول إلى مصادر المعلومات والمخطوطات التي ظلت سابقاً حكراً على المكتبات العالمية. الى جانب أن هذه التجربة قد مكنت الباحثين من تطوير مهاراتهم البحثية من خلال التكنولوجيا الرقمية.

I. Introduction:

This paper is an attempt to present a personal and institutional academic experience of digital learning in Iraq related to the historical studies in the aftermath of the pandemic situation of Covid- 19 since winter of 2020. The experience was difficult in the Iraqi institutions for some reasons. First of all, the Unstable situations of Iraq since the outbreak of the Iraqi Iranian war (1980-1988), the catastrophic results of the invasion of Kuwait in August 2, 1990, the fall of the totalitarian regime in Iraq in 2003 and the political and economic impacts on the academic life, and the world economic crisis after the decreasing of oil prices and ISIS occupation of some Iraqi cities in 2014. All these tensions had affected on the educational life of Iraqi people.

The educational and academic fields in Iraq have continued its efforts to support the teaching process. Although Iraq was one of the successful educational experiences in the Middle East since the 1970s of the 20th century in light of UN acknowledgement. All these situations had affected on the financial and technical support of the educational institutions in Iraq. Before the pandemic, Iraq has a little interest of digital learning and most Iraqi universities have used the normal teaching by attending of the students and educational staff to the universities, but the pandemic led to stop the normal teaching because of the closing of all institutions except the health and security circles. The digital learning was the solution to continue the educational process like the other countries in the word.

II. The Apply of the Digital Learning:

Since February of 2020, we have begun in College of Arts-CoA of the University of Baghdad-UoB to apply the digital learning through cooperation with our administration in UoB. The UoB has provided some infrastructural and digital possibilities for applying this type of education. The CoA has exploited its international academic relations with some countries as Germany, Japan, Austria, and France to enhance the new experience. The UoB has two important MOUs with Deutsches Archaelogisches Institut-DAI in August 2017, and Chiba University in February 2017. This international collaboration contributed to provide the Iraqi German Center for Archaeology and Assyriology. Archeology and ancient history were the two important fields of academic exchange with Germany. The digital facilities contributed to organize virtual lectures in archaeology and ancient history. The German and European scholars have delivered lectures through these digital facilities to the graduate students of CoA².

The Japanese government has also gifted the CoA "the Japan Room" as a laboratory for Japanese language in CoA. The lab was provided by digital facilities for virtual lectures to the undergraduate and graduate students. CoA worked to enhance the international collaboration and use the digital learning in the educational process. This new infrastructure has contributed to provide the background for digital teaching during the pandemic situation and deepened the academic exchange with German and Japanese scholars, in addition to collaboration with Italian, Turkish and Austrian scholars and institutions through Waladu, Banu projects supported by EU and Peace building project supported by Innsbruck University³. All these projects have put the bases for the new era of digital learning through Google Classroom, Zoom and other digital applications.

III. The Medieval European History through Digital Learning:

The first using the digital learning in humanities attributed to the work of Roberto Busa (1913–2011). The Italian Jesuit priest was a philosopher and theologian who specialized in the lexical analysis of the works of Thomas Aquinas. Because of the massive size of Aquinas's oeuvre, Busa quickly found himself in need of an indexing method to search the corpus, one that could surpass the labor-intensive system of handwritten fiche cards with which he began his work. Busa

was quick to recognize the possibilities of the early computing systems that were developed in his lifetime, and in or around 1949 he reached out to Thomas J. Watson, the founder of IBM. Watson and his staff at IBM were impressed with the aspirations of the Italian Jesuit, but IBM was persuaded to participate in a joint research initiative only after the priest pointed out a flyer in the New York office of IBM that said, “The difficult we do right away, the impossible takes a little longer⁴.”

Over the next thirty years, IBM and Busa created the Index Thomisticus project, the world’s first sizable machine-readable corpus, containing, among an array of other related texts, an index verborum of all 118 works of Aquinas, totaling approximately 11 million words. The project required an administrative and organizational staff that was unprecedented for a humanities research initiative at that time, as Aquinas’s entire oeuvre had to be digitized onto punch cards (and later magnetic tapes), which were the primary data carriers in use in the middle of the twentieth century. Over the years, Busa would hire large numbers of young, local, female typists for this specialized task⁵.

In the decades following the onset of the Index Thomisticus project, medievalists were often early adopters of the digital, and continue to play an important role in the development of a broader field, which came to be called digital humanities. This field took other forms and names during its emergence and subsequent development: humanities computing, humanist informatics, literary and linguistic computing, digital resources in the humanities, e-Humanities, and others. These competing alternatives, among which “humanities computing” had long been dominant, have only recently made place for the newly canonical term “digital humanities,” which today is rarely contested. “Digital humanities” is generally meant to refer to a broader field than “humanities computing.” Whereas the latter is restricted to the application of computers in humanities scholarship and had narrower technical goals, the former also incorporates a “humanities of the digital,” including the study (potentially via traditional means) of digitally created sources, such as art and literature. DH is therefore profoundly multidisciplinary and attracts contributions from scholars and scientists both within and outside the humanities and the humanistic social sciences⁶. Thus the Busa efforts contributed to encourage the medievalists to enhance the digitalize the Middle Ages manuscripts, sources and books.

The historiography has take its scientific form at the end of eighteenth century. History, as we understand it today, emerged during the late eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, a specific form of historical thinking emerged, where people began to separate past from present and to write about the past using a linear—that is, chronological—structure⁷. Medieval studies are an independent field of history. It is a middle period between ancient and modern history. The Middle ages which covers approximately ten centuries (500-1500 A.D.) is an important background for the Renaissance and modern history. Although the western institutions regarded the Middle Ages as an independent field, it is still in Iraq as part of modern history. As specialists major in medieval studies in general and the Carolingian studies and English medieval studies in particular, we have started to teach the graduate and undergraduate students through digital learning since the beginning of the pandemic. we have started our scholarship in the beginning of 1990s during the crucial situations of the economic blockade and we focused on the important figure from medieval world, Karl Grosse (Charlemagne, Charles the Great, Carlos Magnus) (768-8140). This figure was interesting topic of study for some reasons; he is a Germanic personality but he resurged the Roman Empire, founded the Carolingian Renaissance, enhanced the economic and political relations with the Moslem World Through his ties with the Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid (786-809 A.D.). He was the first Emperor in the west after the collapse of the Roman Empire at the end of 5th century⁸. The Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, regarded his coronation in December 800 A.D. as the beginning of medieval history⁹. Karl Grosse was also a good example for the comparative study of some fields in the medieval period: the Western Europe, The Moslem Spain (Andalus), the German tribes, Bezantium, The Abbasids. His reign was an image of the international relations and global nation¹⁰.

After completing the project on Charlemagne and the Carolingian history, we have continued our projects to cover the Medieval history of England. The project has studied by M.A.thesis by Mawaheb Adnan Ahmed on “Magna Carta and the beginning of Constitutional Developments in England1215-1225”, which discussed in 2008 and PhD thesis on the Economic developments in England1315-1381” which discussed in 2016¹¹. The medieval studies have extended from university of Baghdad to the Tikrit University-TU through the academic cooperation between the academicians of the two universities.

The teaching of medieval history for the undergraduate students digitally has faced some difficulties. It needs to present manuscripts and visit the libraries, in addition to teach how students learn to understand the Latin texts. This was a difficult process through digital learning before the pandemic. But the digital learning helps to enhance “the increase in digitized manuscripts has been a wonderful by-product of the Internet. Several ongoing projects provide scholars with access to an increasing number of useful manuscripts. Most of these projects are available on the Internet, and usually consist of library exhibits, excerpts from illuminated manuscripts, or, occasionally, complete manuscript”¹². The digital learning has added new skill to the medievalists to extend using of the manuscripts in teaching. The medieval manuscripts can be of value in the undergraduate classroom. manuscripts can foster independent research and give students the opportunity to conduct their own research into numerous topics ranging from literacy to everyday¹³.

The virtual learning has started with the academic year (2019-2010). First year students did not have the chance to meet their scholars face to face. Three groups of the first year students have been taught medieval history and other syllabus digitally. We have seen students just during the final exams of the first and second semesters. There were three to four curriculums chose to apply as a written examination and other curriculum examined digitally.

We think that the digital learning and examination have decreased the level of the students and led to some difficulties of giving the scientific material to the students. This gap of the digital learning was more less for graduate students (M.A. and PhD.). There are two generation did not live the university life since 2020, they did not visit the libraries other educational institutions except two or three times in the year. The applying of mixed digital and face to face learning was successful because of the small number of the graduate students in the class. The graduate students have attended to the university, visited the libraries and met the scholars and their colleagues. This mixed learning has contributed to help students for more understanding of the scientific material, books and texts.

There was some gap between the undergraduate students who examined digitally and the students have face to face exams. Most of them implemented high level grades in the E-exams and low level grades in the face to face exams. This

gap due to the types of the questions by their teacher who use the same type of the face to face exam for e-exam. Most of undergraduate students still used the traditional educational systems through books, in addition to not use laptops and trying to access to the educational websites(See Figures 1 and 2). The situation is better in the case of graduate students due to the educational rules obliged students to apply the academic requirements.

CoA in UoB and TU have depended on Zoom and Google classroom as the official websites for digital learning. Each scholar has his website page in Google classroom and Google Meet is the official website for lectures. He has used the website for videoed lectures, discussion , saving the material and the exams. The most exams for undergraduate students were digitalized but all the exams for graduate students were written examinations in the class.

We have used Google classroom and Google Meet for all educational process and the UoB and CoA have officially supervised on the lectures through the websites sent to the Ibn Sina Center which organized the digital learning in the University of Baghdad. The president , dean and head of the scientific department have the right to enter the lectures digitally, in addition to the visits of the specialists from Ministry of Higher Education& Scientific Research. UoB and CoA who observed this new experiment in the Iraqi Universities. The CoA has used Zoom website for local and international lectures. Each teacher has his official page on Google Classroom to deliver lectures to both undergraduate and graduate students, in addition to seminar page for all teachers and students of the scientific departments. The page contains all the lectures,videos,quiz and exams, in addition to papers send by teacher and his students.

We have hosted many guests from European, American and Japanese universities. The guest professors have delivered lectures for undergraduate and graduate students in the field of archaeology, ancient history and Islamic studies. Their lectures have been recorded as materials for students in the digital archive of CoA-UoB. Our students have also meet with their partners in the Japanese universities. This type of virtual lectures has enhanced the academic exchange with many international institutions and opened the way for discussion on topic related to medieval studies, Iraqi history and other fields in the University of Baghdad.

The digital learning has been successful and fruitful in the Iraqi educational institutions although some difficulties related to internet network, technical facilities and financial support. This experience has encouraged us to benefit from our agreements and MOUs with international universities and institutions to expand the digital learning in the UoB. We are enhancing the participation of Chiba university staff, which is one of the prominent universities in Japan, to deliver lectures for graduate students in the field of modern history. We will start to teach “The Modern History of Japan” by professor Keiko SAKAI, the former dean of the Faculty of Politics, Economics and Law in Chiba University and the present dean of the Center of the Relational Studies on the Global Crises in the same university since the 2nd semester of the academic year(2021-2022). This contribution will lead other Japanese and Iraqi scholars to participate in this kind of digital learning as a step to invite the foreign scholars as a visiting professor to Iraq after the end of the pandemic. This step has represented the global perception of the University of Baghdad in the way of international approach.

We have applied some joint lectures from Iraq, Japan and Germany, as the meetings of the students UoB, Mustansiriyah University and Chiba University. The undergraduate students of three universities and their scholars have met and discussed their studies and future ambitions. The digital and mixed lectures through Google Meet, and the local and international joint lectures through Zoom have help our UoB to continue the educational process without any shortage during the two years of the pandemic.

IV. Conclusion (Problems and Solutions):

The experience of CoA of UoB and TU of the digital learning has opened the new aspects in the field of education and culture. The pandemic challenge led the Iraqi higher education institutions to response through enhancing the technology and providing the facilities in all Iraqi universities to switch to the digital learning and applying the mixed learning after some response to the pandemic at the end of 2020. The preserving of the quality of the education through the digital learning is the great challenge of the Iraqi institutions. A study shows that ”E-learning has become quite popular among the students all over the world particularley, the lockdown period due to the Covid -19 pandemic”¹⁴.

Although the successful efforts of the University of Baghdad and Tikrit University in digital learning, we still face many problems. The new use of the digital learning and the lack of the technical facilities and the financial support were the initial challenge in Iraq. The Iraqi universities have lacked to the financial support for the academic projects as in the western universities. This lack of financial support from the governmental and private institutions was the first problem of the academic work in Iraq. The UoB, like other universities, has not any budgets for electronic access to the scientific material in most fields of knowledge. We have lacked in the university to access to web search engine as JSTOR freely. We obliged to access through our colleagues in the international institutions. Iraq as a developing country is still suffering from the same unstable countries problems. According to a study “The highest challenge for accepting e-learning were insufficient / unstable internet connectively, inadequate computer labs, lack of computers/laptops, and technical problems”¹⁵. These are the same problems challenge the e-learning in Iraq, especially most students received their lectures from their homes.

The problems challenged the undergraduate students are their use of their phones and don't learn the skills to deal with computers. According to my experience for two years, 80% of undergraduate students use the phone, especially in the first class. The phones are not contain all the programs in the other devices like computers and laptops. Another problem is e-quizz at the end of the lecture and the questions of the final exams. Some teachers use the same criteria of the face to face exams. This misuse of the questions impacts on the final results.

I think that more collaboration with foreign universities will minimize the gap between Iraq and the developed countries. Our cooperation in CoA with DAI, Heidelberg University, Marburg University, Chiba University and Innsbruck University are successful examples of international collaboration between Middle East and the world. The international support to the Iraqi universities will contribute to pass this crucial situations resulted from the political instabilities, wars and economic crises. The international projects in CoA even during the pandemic confirm the importance of international engagements. The UNESCO Chair for preventing of Genocide in the UoB-2019, and peace building studies of CoA with Innsbruck university-2018, and the Japanese and German projects have

contributed to expand the global approach of the university of Baghdad and the digital learning was the cornerstone in all these projects with the international partners. We think faithfully that this opportunity of the Iraqi scholars with Passau University will be a new step of the international collaboration with German universities. The E-learning make the education global in Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries.

Figure 1: Devices, Discussions and Exams

Students	Devices	Discussion	Exams and Quiz
Undergraduate First Year: A, B, C Classes (170 persons)	90% Use Mobile 10% Use Laptop	30%	50% E-Exams 50% face to face Exams
Graduate M. A. (8-10 persons)	50% Use Mobile 50% Use Laptop	100%	50% E-Exam 50% face to face exam
Graduate PhD students (5-8 persons)	40% Use Mobile 60% Use Laptop	100%	50% E-Exam 50% face to face Exam

This figure based on Questionnaire with Undergraduate and Graduate student in the academic year (2020-2021) in CoA-UoB.

Figure 2: Access to the Researching Engines

Students	Jstor and other Websites	Academia.edu and other Research gates	Personal E-mail
Undergraduate First Year: A, B, C Classes (170 persons)	5%	5%	20%
Graduate M. A. (8-10 persons)	20%	10%	60%
Graduate PhD students (5-8 persons)	50%	60%	100%

This figure based on Questionnaire with students in the academic year (2020-2021) in CoA-UoB.

Footnotes and Comments:

¹ V.Sathishkumar et als,"E-Learning during Lockdown of Covid-1-Pandemic: A Global Perspective",in:International journal of Control and Automation,13(4):1088-1099.

² See the archive of Department of the Cultural Affairs of the University of Baghdad which contains the MOUs with Japan and Germany, in addition to other agreements and MOUs of the University of Baghdad with the Arab and international universities and institutions.

³ The Contents of MOUs with DAI and Chiba University are in the Department of the Cultural Affairs of the University of Baghdad.

⁴ David J. Birnbaum, Sheila Bonde and Mike Kestemont," The Digital Middle Ages", in: Speculum , OCTOBER 2017, Vol. 92, No. S1 (OCTOBER 2017), pp. S1-S2.

⁵ Ibid.,P.S2.

⁶ Ibid.,P.S2-S3.

⁷ Stefan Tanaka, Writing History in the Digital Age, University of Michigan Press; Digitalculturebooks, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65sx57.8>,PP.36-37.

⁸ I published some publications on the Carolingian history as Charlemagne and Others,Baghdad,Dar Alshu'on Althaqafiya Al'ma,2012(In Arabic); and translated " Harun Alrashid and Charlemagne of Francis Bucler into Arabic ,Baghdad,Baytal Hikma,2013;My graduate students continued to work on Medieval studies as Mawahib Adnan Ahmed,Magna Carta and the beginning of the Constitutional Development in England(1215-1225),Baghdad,Adnan Press,2018;Murtadha A. Abdulhussein,Charlemane and Harun Al-Rashid A Study of the Economic Relations and political Ties,Baghdad, ,Dar Alshu'on Althaqafiya Al'ma,2020; Saja Muhammed Ali.The Song of Roland ,Baghdad,Baytal Hikma,2021. All these works written by Arabic language. I published some articles in English and Arabic as" Harun al-Rashid and Charlemagne Reading in the relations between Europe and the Islamic East", Lecture Delivered in Marburg University,October 2019.

⁹ Henri Pirenne,Mohammed and Charlemagne,3rd ed.,New York,Meridian Book,INC,1959. There is a project to translate the book into Arabic by cooperation with professor Falah Al-Assadi.

¹⁰ C.F. Einhard , The life of Charlemagne, London , Ann Arbor paperbacks, 1960 ., PP. 42-43 ; Monk of Saint Gall , De Carolo Magno, In : Lewis Thorpe, Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, two lives of Charlemagne, London , Penguin Books, 1971., PP. 145-149; Majeed Khadoori, diplomatic ties between Harun Al Rasheed and Charlemagne, Baghdad, Al Tafayedh Al Ahlia press, 1939(in Arabic), p 4; Abdul Azeez Al Douri, the first Abbasid Age, Baghdad, 1944, p 149(in Arabic).

¹¹ Mawahib Adnan Ahmed, Magna Carta and the beginning of the Constitutional Development in England (1215-1225); M.A. thesis submitted to the College of education for Human Sciences-University of Tikrit, 2008, and published in 2018; Mawaheb Adnan Ahmed, The Economic Development in England, Phd thesis submitted to the college of education for Human Sciences-University of Tikrit, 2016 (in Arabic). She directs the medieval studies through choosing some important periods and figures as "the internal policy of Saint Louis 1226-1270" as M.A. thesis in medieval history which was submitted to the CoA-TU in 2021 (in Arabic).

¹² Andrea Winkler, "Digitized Medieval Manuscripts in the Classroom: A Project in Progress", in: The History Teacher, Feb., 2002, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Feb., 2002), pp. 201-202.

¹³ Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁴ V. Sathishkumar et al., "E-Learning during Lockdown of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Global Perspective", in: International Journal of Control and Automation, 13(4):1088-1099.

¹⁵ Marwa Mohamed Zalat et al., "The Experiences, Challenges, and Acceptance of e-Learning as a Tool for Teaching during the Covid-19 Pandemic among University Medical Staff", Plos One /<https://doi.org/10.1371/Journal.pone.0248758>. March 26, 2021.