

My School Diary:

How I faced Study Challenges

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Contents

1. My First Day in School.....	3
2. Studying French in Grade 10.....	4
3. Studying Grade 12 At Home	6
4. Molar Teeth Pain during Final Exams	8
5. How my father pushed me to learn English	8
6. My father's death during final exams	9
7. When I got 30% on the GRE Test	10
8. Failing My Statistics Test as a Graduate Student.....	15
9. My college experience (1).....	18
10. My college experience (2).....	19
11. Losing My Ph.D. Thesis.....	20
12. My experience with back Pain	22
13. Losing My Father.....	23
14. Taking a summer course in Ramadan	26
15. Taking my comprehensive exams in Ramadan.....	27
16. Working on Ph.D. thesis in Ramadan.....	29
17. A warm defense on a cold day	30
18. Winter In Iowa	32
19. البحث العلمي في الماضي.....	33
20. حكايتي مع رسالة الدكتوراه.....	34

My First Day in School

When I was five years old, my parents sent me to Jordan to start school. I got there at night and the following morning my aunt took me to school. I still remember 2 unusual, but interesting incidents that happened that day which I will never forget for the rest of my life. The first one is the candy boxes that my grandfather had bought and had my aunt take to school as a gift for my teachers and classmates. Before I went to my classroom, my aunt took me to the principal's office and had me hold one box and offer it to the school principal. I did that with my arms up (I was too short and the principal was too tall then), my head down and my eyes looking at the floor. I was so shy as all the teachers were looking at me and smiling. Next, we went to my classroom and I had to carry the second box, go around and give candy to every child in my class. Once again I was shy as I was never among so many children in one room. The reason I had to take candy with me to school was that when I was born, I was the first baby girl in the family. My grandfather was so happy. He made a promise that if he lived to see me go to school, he would send my teachers and classmates chocolate. I still remember how the boxes looked like. The second incident is that I tried to go home on my own and I got lost. I was walking in the street and crying. My aunt was a high school student.

Although she asked me to wait for her to pick me up, I found the school gate open and decided to wander around. Thinking that I could walk home on my own, I was walking in circles and did not know where to go. So I cried and cried and cried. But finally, my aunt was able to find me and take me home safely.

Studying French in Grade 10

Between the ages of 5-15, I lived in Jordan where I went to school. In the middle of grade 10 I moved back to Saudi Arabia. My father registered me in Al-Zahra'a School. On my first day, I found out that my classmates were taking French and had covered half of the textbook. I did not know a single word. I did not panic at all because I loved to learn languages and thought learning French would be exciting. When I got home, I told my father about it and he took me to a tutor: an old teacher from Lebanon. In the first class we started with Unit One which consisted with a set of pictures and the names of the objects underneath (4 rows of pictures with 4 pictures in each row). He read them once for me and asked me to read. I started laughing because I could not pick up the pronunciation of those words. I was the first time I hear French words. I started to read and the tutor prompted me. Next, the tutor asked me to look at the first row of pictures, close the book and spell them without looking at the book. I found that task challenging and could only spell those that were similar to English like "auto, tente" but misspelled the rest. The teacher said that was O.K. because it was the first class and that I was supposed to memorize all the words at home and had to spell them the following day. He told me he wanted me to have a good foundation in French. I went home excited and

thought the first class was fun. Every time I went to the tutor's, I took several lessons, had to read, had to spell and most importantly had to write down the verb conjugation. I found French grammar a bit difficult because there is feminine and masculine gender and the definite and indefinite articles have to agree with the noun in number and gender. I had to remember the gender of each noun and I found nouns whose gender is different from Arabic difficult and confusing. But those required more memorization, more review. I always studied and memorized everything the teacher taught me. Everyday I had to spell and recite the conjugation of verb "etre" and "avoir". The tutor was a good language teacher but very strict. If I made a single mistake or forgot a form that goes with a single pronoun, or forgot the gender of a noun, he would tell my father that I was not studying properly. He would also tell me that I was negligent. He expected me to know every single word perfectly well. My father was very understanding and never yelled at me or punished me. Everyday, I studied the words (meaning, spelling, conjugation, singular and plural forms), answered the comprehension questions. At the end of the week, I'd review the whole weeks work. I would spend extra time studying and reviewing those words that I found difficult or confusing. When I was a student, I always liked to go beyond the book for extra practice. I used my brother's French-Arabic dictionary to learn extra words and read more about French grammar. The

dictionary had an appendix that covered everything a student needs to know about French pronunciation and French grammar. Very accurate and detailed descriptions and explanations were given in Arabic. I used to read the instructions and apply what is there. In just few weeks, I could catch up with my classmates and I became very good in French. I even surpassed my classmates who were struggling with the French language. Our French teacher at school was a lady from Lebanese and she had difficulty managing the class and making things clear, i.e. she was a poor language teacher and the students did not know much French. So I started to teach my classmates everything my tutor taught me.

Studying Grade 12 At Home

When I was in grade 12, there was only one high school for girls in Mecca and that school had only one class for students in the arts track. I was in the science track. So I had to study at home and had to sit for the final exam at the end of the academic year.

During grade 12, I was fully responsible for my own studying as my father was always out at work, my mother could not read or write, my older brother was in the States and I was the oldest child at home. In addition, I was a proud student and had great self-confidence. Studying at home was a new experience for me. I considered more as an adventure than as a burden or obstacle, and I enjoyed the challenge very much. I decided to succeed in my endeavor no matter how much it cost me, as grade 12 was a critical year in my life. I felt that I was my own master.

At the beginning of the school year, my father got me all the books. I went through the books one by one and examined the number of chapters in each. I divided each book by the number of months in the academic year, then by number of weeks and found out how many pages I needed to cover each week. Those, in turn, were broken into two, three and four study sessions per week. Weekly allotments differed from one subject to another.

Second, I sat to build my own study schedule. I built two schedules: A morning schedule and an afternoon schedule. My morning schedule was similar to a school schedule and my afternoon schedule was for reviewing, doing homework and solving problems and preparing for the next day. In my morning schedule I had 5-7 classes per day. Each class lasted for 45, 60 or 90 minutes depending on the length and difficulty level of the subject. I also had breaks in between, a lunch hour and naptime. During the study periods, I used to read the assigned pages, as a teacher would do in class.

In my afternoon schedule, I also had several study periods, breaks, and time for dinner. In the afternoon, I reviewed what I studied in the morning, and did all the exercises and solved the math and science problems in my textbooks. In addition to that, I had 4 tutors who taught me four subjects: math, Arabic grammar and rhetoric, physics and English. I studied the rest of the subjects on my own without the help of tutors. My tutors never explained the lesson in full to me. Rather, they explained the parts that I did not understand and helped solve the math and science problems that I found difficult. Each tutor came twice or three times a week. Tutoring sessions were part of my afternoon schedule as well.

I always started my morning sessions at the same time and stopped studying at the same time, took lunch and a nap

and then resumed my afternoon schedule at the same time. I always tried to stick to the time allotted to each subject whether I finished the part I was supposed to study for that day or not. If I finished a subject in less than the designated time, I would use the remaining time to finish what was unfinished. This happened occasionally.

I always started my day and moved from one subject to another with a surge of enthusiasm. I enjoyed every word I read and every problem I solved. The more I covered of each subject, the greater my sense of achievement became.

Two months before the final exams, I had covered all the material in my textbooks and had started my review of all the subjects. I reviewed every textbook, solved all the math problems and did all the exercises 3 times. I had a special schedule for that as well.

By the time the final exams started, I had mastered all the subjects. I had one final exam per day. During the test session, I had no problem recalling the information and answering the questions, although I did not have in-term tests during the academic year like students in a regular school. In my case, each final exam was graded out of 100. When the final exam results were published in the newspaper, I found out that I had passed with good grades. My parents, especially my father, were very proud of me.

Passing the high school exam had a special value to me as it culminated a year full of hard work and the highest level of self-discipline and determination. It gave me more self-confidence, and strengthened my belief in my ability to achieve anything I aspire for.

Molar Teeth Pain during Final Exams

Between my freshman and senior years in college my 4 molars (wisdom teeth) came out. My molars used to come out one at a time and one per year. The best time for my molars to come out was during final exams, which always lasted for more than 2 weeks. Every time, a molar came out, I was in severe pain. I would have high fever; a headache and a very swollen cheek. In addition to traditional remedies, I always went to the dentist who would give me antibiotics, pain relievers, fever reducers and a mouthwash. I always had a minor oral surgery in which the dentist would cut the part of the gums covering the top of the molar to help it come out. It was difficult for me to sleep, to eat and to study. So I always cried and cried and cried. My father used to sit by my bed at night, take care of me and give me moral support. No matter how painful my molars were, I never missed a final exam. I always reviewed as much as I could, and would go to college with a swollen cheek and sit for the exams. I never felt like postponing the final exams. I was always patient and always passed with excellent grades.

How my father pushed me to learn English

I was English major in college and in my freshman year my father got sick. He went to the doctor's who gave him some medications. When my father got home, he called me and asked me to read the leaflets of his medications and tell him what the side effects and indications of each medicine are. I said apologetically that I was still freshman and that I was English not medicine major. There are many difficult words in the leaflet. My father said: "Shame on you, is that why I sent you to college, I am not asking you to give me an answer now. Don't you have a dictionary?" "Yes I do" I replied. "Take your time. Look up the meanings of the difficult words in the dictionary and then give me an answer. Every time my father received an English telegram, he would hand it to me and ask me to tell him what it was about. When I was junior in college, he asked me to listen to the news on the BBC and tell about what was going on in the word. When I did for the first time, I did not understand much and could not re-tell the meaning in Arabic. So I had to listen to the same news cast every hour in order to be able to tell my father the details in Arabic. I thank my father for pushing me to go beyond books and teaching me to search for information instead of saying I can't and I do not know.

My father's death during final exams

When my father passed away, I was an M.A. student and it was final exams. It was Monday night and I was studying for the final exam of course about education administration. The following morning I went to school as I was a teacher and when I got home in the afternoon I knew that my father had passed away. I could not go to the university to sit for the final exam. The following Tuesday was the last day of the course and we were supposed to go to class to give a presentation about our research papers. So I thought I would be possible for me to re-take the final exam then. So after the funeral and morning days were over (3 days), I tried to study but I could not. I was so sad that it was difficult for me to concentrate. I spent 6 hours studying one page but in vain. On Tuesday (a week after my father's death) I went to class. When my instructor saw me, she asked me why I did not take the final exam. I told her that my father passed away. She said she was sorry and that I had to re-take the exam right then. I told her that I could not review the material and was not ready. She insisted that I take it then and if I did not, I would get a zero. She added that even though I was the best student in her class and even if I get a full mark for my semester work, I would fail the course, if I don't. She asked me to go out and try to review while my classmates are giving their presentations and that I had to sit for

the test at the end of the session, i.e. 60 minutes. I went out of the classroom and started to cry. Some of my classmates gathered around me. Some offered to read for me and others offered me their notes. I told them that I was having trouble concentrating and recalling and that it was impossible to review a whole semester's material in just an hour. I was certain I was going to fail. While crying, I was flipping the pages of my notes and felt that there was no way out. An hour later, I went in and sat in front of my instructor. She asked me questions that I could answer without having reviewed the material and I answered them all. She smiled at me and said that I have passed with an A.

When I got 30% on the GRE Test

Going to the States for graduate school was always the dream of my life. However at one point, that dream seemed too impossible as my family, like many families in Saudi Arabia, did not allow me to go to the States on my own to study. My older brother, who was studying in the States, got his Ph.D. degree and came home before I graduated. It was until I got my M.A. degree, when Uncle Adel and his family, who live in the States, came over for a visit in the summer after my father had passed away earlier. When my Uncle and his wife learnt that I had obtained my M.A. with honors, Auntie Amal wondered why I didn't go the States for my Ph.D. "I am not allowed to go there on my own, I answered. "I need to stay with a relative there", I added. She thought it over with my uncle at night, and while having breakfast the following morning, they invited me to stay with them while studying for my Ph.D. They added that I needed to take the TOEFL, GRE, and make arrangements to go to the States the following year. They added that the GRE test was extremely difficult. "Not for me", I said confidently. "How does it look like?" I asked. They were kind enough to send me a GRE book and so did my brother who was working at KFUPM. I was extremely excited and felt that my dream was about to come true. It was only a year away and the only obstacle was the GRE test.

I took the sample GRE test at the beginning of the book and scored it using the answer key. I found out that despite the fact that I was English major and that I had graduated from Umm Al-Qura University with honors, I only got a score of 30% on the GRE. As usual, I thought that getting 30% was not important and what was more important is not to stay at that low level. I was determined to study and work on my weaknesses in order to go to the States.

I examined my answers and found out that I had the following weaknesses: (1) On the Verbal Part: I had to read 5 long passages about specialized topics and answer 80 questions in just 50 minutes. Although the questions were multiple choice questions, the 4 options were too close which made it difficult to choose one. This required a high comprehension level, not at the literal level, but at the inferential level. The questions also contained gap filling items that required the selection of one word out of four and all the words were unknown to me. (2) The Quantitative Part required answering 50 multiple-choice math questions in 30 minutes. In order to choose an answer, you have to solve the problem and solve it right, in order to make the correct choice. If you unknowingly make a mistake in solving the problem, you will find your wrong answer among the options. (3) The Analytical Part had 50 problems to answer in 30 minutes and those were like riddles, and required logical thinking.

I found out that I was not reading fast enough to finish the passages and answer the questions in the designated time. I did not know the vocabulary items included on the test. I was not familiar with the mathematical terms and could not solve math problems in English. I was not familiar with the logical-analytical type of problems. What I liked about the GRE books was that they contained some tips on how to answer GRE questions, had some passages and some math and logical problems for practice. In addition, one of the books had a list of 3000 words from which the vocabulary test items are selected.

I made a strategic plan for improving my GRE test scores. The plan had 4 goals: improving my reading speed, memorizing 3000 words, memorizing math terms and practicing math problems in English and practicing analytical problems.

Every day I studied for 7 hours (from 5 p.m. - 12 a.m.) and I did that for 5 straight months and was able to memorize the 3000 words in 2 months.

My daily schedule included a time slot for reading, another for memorizing and reviewing 50 words, a third one for memorizing math terms and solving math problems in English, and a fourth one for solving logical problems.

Every night I prepared 50 vocabulary cards for the following day. Since we

did not have index cards or ready-made blank vocabulary cards that I could buy from the bookstore, I had to make the cards myself from scratch. My younger brother used to buy sketch books used for drawing classes. I used to draw squares with a ruler and pencil and cut them. This means that I cut 3000 small cards.

Although the English meaning of the 3000 words were given in the book in English, every night I looked up the Arabic meaning of 50 words. I believed that working on my words and looking up their meanings myself would help me in learning them. I wrote each word on one side of the card and its Arabic meaning on the back and wrapped a rubber band around them. I used shoe boxes to keep my vocabulary cards. I had many sets: some for easy words, some for extremely difficult words that I needed to review many times and over different time periods.

I started my vocabulary study session by reviewing the words I memorized the day before, and would place the words I could not recall aside. I would re-study those first before moving on to learning the new set. After studying the new set, I would shuffle the cards and test myself. Sometimes I tested myself several times for consolidation. I would look at the English word and give the Arabic meaning and would review for a second time looking at the Arabic meaning and giving the English word. I re-studied those words that were difficult to master. I had the words that

were difficult to remember together in one set and would review them several days in a row and then at different intervals.

This was I was able to memorize all 3000 words in 2 months. since many English words consist of prefixes, suffixes and roots, I thought learning some would help me a lot. So I went through Al-Mawrid Dictionary (which has more than 1000 pages) page by page and copied all the prefixes, suffixes, and roots in a notebook. Next to each I wrote the Arabic meaning and few examples. I made lists of words that share the same prefix, suffix or root such as "democracy, autocracy, beaurocracy etc.). In my notebook, I had about 500 prefixes, suffixes and roots.

To learn about speed reading, how to improve my ability to memorize and recall a large amount of vocabulary items, I used to read about memory, attention and study skills in psychology books. A vocabulary quiz in Readers' Digest magazine was also very helpful.

As for reading I read everything I could find. Every month I bought the Readers' Digest magazine and read it from cover to cover. I used to keep a book in my desk at school and read while eating my sandwich during recess and even read while going upstairs to class. I did not want to waste a single minute. In order to develop new reading skills, I ordered a book from London about speed reading which arrived 2-3

months later. I read in all subject areas: psychology, education, sociology, biology, chemistry and others.

For the math part, I memorized math terms from a book that my father had and solved math and logical problems in the GRE books.

To measure my progress, I took a practice test once every month, scored my answers using the answer key, and examined my errors to find out why I made those mistakes and what was going on in my mind when I answered a particular question and how I should have looked at it and thought about it. I found out that every month, the result of 7 hours of hard work and continuous studying was only 20% and the number of items I could finish within the time limit set by the test was getting better but was neither fast nor good enough to go to the States. I was never frustrated, was patient and determined to improve. I knew that the process was long and slow, but was sure I would get there one day. Whenever I felt tired, bored or frustrated, I'd visualize America and my dream of studying at the university there. I would remind myself that the only obstacle was the GRE. Passing the GRE was under my control and no one else's.

Two months later, I sat for the GRE test. The GRE used to be held at the American Embassy in Jeddah several times a year at specific dates. Before taking the test at a particular date, you have to fill out an application form and

mail it to the States with the registration fee. The first time I took the test, my GRE score was not good enough. I knew that I would not get a good score. I just wanted to have a feel for the real test atmosphere and how much I could answer within the designated time in the real test session. I also found out that in the actual test session I answered fewer questions than when I took the practice test at home.

I was planning to re-take the test after 2 months and had sent my application. But I was extremely stressed out and I got sick as a result. I was having severe headaches and felt dizzy at the same time. My brother took me to an Egyptian doctor who was my father's friend. The doctor examined me and could not find anything wrong. So he asked: "Are you thinking about anything?". "She is thinking about the States", my brother answered with a laugh. The doctor got excited and wanted to know all about it. My brother told him how hard I was working and how many hours I was studying. The doctor assured me that I would go to the States and I would get my Ph.D. But he requested that I take a break and he prescribed some medications.

I was taking the medications and was studying at the same time, but my condition got worse and went to the doctor's for the second time. The doctor gave me strict orders to stop studying and take a break for 2 weeks.

He advised me to read children's stories and go out for a walk in the open. I did that for 2 weeks and soon I was feeling better and when I resumed my studying, I was doing better.

I mail-ordered more copies of the GRE which I answered for extra practice. Rather than taking a sample test every month, I started to take it every 2 weeks. I answered a total of 16 test.

After another two months I took the GRE test and I passed the test with high scores. I only made 7 mistakes on the Verbal Part and my math score was higher than 93% of all the students who take the worldwide.

It is noteworthy to say that when I was studying for the GRE, I was working as an English teacher at a junior high school in Makkah. I went to school from 7 a.m. - 2 p.m. I had to prepare for my classes, prepare audio-visual aids, check homework, prepare tests and grade them in addition to other responsibilities at schools.

In the early 1980's, we did not have faxes, photocopiers, express mail service, the internet and online orders. Everything had to be done by hand, had to be sent by regular airmail and things took a long time to process. Many English books, magazines, newspapers and other sources were not available in Makkah either.

Finally, the amount of time and effort I put in studying for the GRE paved the

way for a new struggle that preceded my travel to the States and more challenges while studying there.

Failing My Statistics Test as a Graduate Student

The third semester I was in the States, I was taking my third statistics course about the design of experiments in psychology and Education. We were supposed to take 3 in-term tests (a test per month) and a final exam. My Instructor, Dr Feldt, a well-known scholar in statistics, gave us a statistics textbook as a reference book, and we were supposed to take notes in class while he was explaining how to solve statistics problems. A month had passed and it was time to take our first in-term. Although I was taking notes in class and I used to review every lesson I took right after getting home from class, I spent the whole weekend reviewing the material, reading my notes carefully and re-studying the sample problems given by Dr Feldt.

When we got our test papers back, I was chocked to find out that I got 9 out of 25 (36%). What was worse was that my score was the lowest in class. I took my paper home and spent the whole night crying and crying and crying. All my life I was an "A" student and getting 36% on a test was even more than a surprise or even a chock.

Being an autonomous learner, and being honest with myself, I thought crying would not help me improve my score. Dropping the course would not

help either. I did not blame my instructor for my giving me a very low score, did not beg my instructor for more marks, did not beg him to give me an extra assignment to improve my grade, did not ask him to taking into consideration that I was 8000 miles away from home, or the fact that I was a foreign student who came from an educational setting and educational background different from that of American students'. Instead, I sat down and tried to diagnose my weaknesses. I started to read the questions and go through my answers to find out why I made mistakes in solving the statistical problems on the test. I also went to Dr Feldt and asked him to show me my mistakes. He did. This way I could pinpoint my weakness and in brief, they were as follows: (1) I confused the statistical symbols as they were not standardized. I took 3 statistics courses with three different instructors, and different statistical symbols were used in each course and by each instructors. The same statistical symbol meant different things in each course. So when I solved the problems on the test, I used what the symbols meant in my second statistics course not what they stood for in Dr Feldt's course. (2) My notes were incomplete. I could not catch every single detail while Dr Feldt was teaching and solving problems on the board. I used to sit in the back. (3) Dr feldt gave only one problem as an assignment and this was not enough for me to master the designs we were studying and to be able to solve any problem on the test. (4) The textbook

was difficult and it did not have sufficient and detailed explanations about each type of experimental design, its language was difficult, concepts were very advanced and what Dr Feldt was giving information that was a little different from what was in the book.

"It is not important to get a 9, but what is more important is not to get another 9 on the second in-term ", I thought to myself. So I went home and set a new plan for studying statistics. The plan consisted of the following: (1) I went through my statistics books for the 3 courses, and on a sheet of paper with 3 columns, I made a list of all the statistical symbols used for the same concept and how it is represented in each book. (2) Every time I had a statistics class, I'd either compared my notes with some of my classmates' or went to Dr Felt to take a look at them and see if I missed any important point. (3) I went to the library and looked for additional books on design of experiments but unfortunately I could find any. So I went to Dr Felt and asked him to recommend some books and asked for extra problems for practice. He lent me a couple of his books, which I photocopied in full and returned to him. (4) I build a daily schedule for studying statistics.

I started to re-study all the lessons that I had taken right from the beginning. Every day I focused on one design. I would study my notes, read the sample problems given by Dr Feldt, study the

chapters on that design in the three new books and then sit to solve the extra problems. If I had a problem, I would go and ask Dr Feldt for help. I studied day and night and over weekends as I needed to raise my grade on the second in-term. As a graduate student, I was not supposed to fail a course or even get a C. This meant that I would be expelled from the program and it would be the end of studies and would go home as a failure. That was unacceptable to and could not even visualize it. My task was so difficult and very time consuming at a time when I was taking other courses and each of my instructor was demanding. I had two options: either to hang on and struggle or to drop the course and re-take it the following semester. But Who guarantees that I would not run into similar problems then? Dropping the course also meant that I would be delayed in my program would not be able to register for other course for which design of experiments was a prerequisite. However, I'd go for the second option if I were only failing the course for sure or even passing it with a C. Fortunately the deadline for dropping the course was a couple of days after the second in-term. So I decided to sit for the second in-term to see how much I've improved over a month of intensive studying. I told Dr Felt about my intention and he agreed to it.

I sat for the second in-term and Dr Feldt was nice enough to grade my paper first to help me make my final

decision: either continue or drop the course. To my surprise I got 15 out of 25 which meant 6 points more than the first in-term. Although my grade was still lower than what I am used to getting, I was happy because I made some progress and my studying plan was working and proved to be effective. My experience with the GRE taught that improvement does not happen overnight, over a week or over a month. It is steady but slow. It requires patience and perseverance over a prolonged period of time. But there is light at the end of the tunnel. So I decided to stay.

The following month I continued to follow my study strategy and that month was not as demanding as the previous month, because I did not have to re-study the first part. That meant that I had more time to re-study the lessons I was taking and going over the additional problems a few more times for more mastery. The third in-term I got 19 out of 25 and on the final exam my score was one of the top 5 in my class which had more than 50 students. Dr Feldt was extremely impressed and he told me that even American students do not exert the same effort and do not improve as much as I did. He was always proud of me.

Dr Feldt wrote the statistics questions for my comprehensive exams and was one of my thesis committee members. From "Design of Experiments" I learnt more about failure and success than any other course. My feelings of

inadequacy in that course laid the foundation for the amount of effort I need to put forth and types of skills I need to develop, which in turn laid the foundation for the competent researcher I am today. It made me realize how much potential and will-power a student has and what determination can do. Whenever I go to Iowa, I stop by Dr Feldt's office (which he still has) to say hi. Dr Feldt has retired a few years ago and whenever I need a consultation I always contact him by e-mail.

My college experience

(1)

When I was freshman at the English Department at Umm Al-Qura University, I used to go to class in the afternoon. Classes used to start 4:30 p.m. and last until 9 p.m. There were 12 students in my class and we did not have teachers for the Islamic education and other Arabic courses, so we had to study them on our own and sit for the final exam. It was not easy for us to buy the textbooks for the courses as the local book stores did not sell them and we had to order them from London, Beirut or Pakistan. We could not photocopy books, homework, articles and other things as photocopiers were not available then. Sometimes we would have few books and the students had to share. The library did not carry any references. Our instructor used to lend us her books in order to use them for writing our research papers. We took turns in borrowing the books. We could borrow any single book for one night, read and write as many things as we could from the book as we could not photocopy the book.

My college experience (2)

I was a part-time graduate student and an English teacher at the same time. I taught English at a junior high school in the morning, and took graduate courses in the evening. I was not allowed to study or do homework at school. I managed my time in such a way so that I could take care of my school work such as preparing for classes, preparing and grading tests, checking homework, and preparing audio-visual aids. I also did my homework, read the reading assignments and wrote papers for my graduate courses. Some week days were devoted to school work and the rest for my graduate work. The toughest time was when I was working on my M.A. thesis as it involved a field study, grading of the test and analyzing the students' responses, doing the statistical analysis and writing and re-writing the thesis sections several times. I used to stay up late working on my thesis and wake up early in the morning to go to school. For a whole semester, I got 4 hours of sleep only. I had to write and re-write everything by hand as we did not have computers and I did not know anybody who would type it for me. When I graduated, I was proud of myself, partly because I was a part-time student with lots of responsibilities and more importantly because my thesis turned out to be outstanding. I was even more proud, when my advisor in the States read my

M.A. thesis and was greatly impressed as well. She could not find any fault with it. So many years have passed since I got my M.A. degree. All is left is the great sense of achievement. The fatigue, the hard-work and agonies are all gone and they are just history.

Losing My Ph.D. Thesis

The first step in preparing a doctoral thesis begins with preparing a proposal. A proposal is a summary of what a doctoral thesis is about, i.e., the topic to be investigated and the research methodology. A proposal is usually presented to the student's committee that reads and approves or disapproves the student's proposal. If the committee approves the proposal, then the student can go ahead and finish the thesis. If not, the student has to consider another topic for her/his thesis.

Unlike other proposals, my proposal consisted of 130 pages and took a whole year to prepare. I visited several schools and observed ESL classes. I prepared my observation form, applied it, told what statistical techniques I was going to use, and what results I expected to obtain. In brief, my proposal contained a detailed account of what I was going to do in my thesis.

Every day, I went to the Computer Center, and worked on my proposal for long hours. After finishing a particular section, I would type it on the computer, print it, and hand in to my advisor. My advisor would read it and write comments on it. Then I would make the necessary corrections and retype that section. I did that several times as my advisor was always meticulous and always made sure that everything was perfect.

One day before I was supposed to turn in my proposal to my committee members, I was making my final corrections in the evening. After working for few hours, I wanted to take a short break. So I saved my work, crossed the street, and went to the Quick Trip store, for coffee. After I had my coffee, I went back to the Computer Center to print the final version of my proposal. To my surprise, every time I tried to open my thesis file, the computer responded by saying that there was no file. After several trials, I discovered that I had lost my whole thesis, i.e., my 130 pages as a result of a mistake that I made in saving my thesis file.

I cannot find the words to describe how I felt that moment. I felt like a multimillionaire who had lost all his money in a second. In just a second, all kinds of ideas were going on in my mind. I was thinking of what I might do to have my thesis ready by the next morning. It was not possible to take the draft that I had at home and make 6 copies of it, as all the photocopying centers were closing. It was not also possible to retype 130 pages myself and have them ready by the next day. It was too late to contact a secretary at 8:45 p.m., have her retype my proposal and have it ready by the next day. In brief, I was in a predicament. I could only visualize failure. I felt that that was the end of my graduate study and was certain I would never see the day I graduate. So I broke down and cried my heart out.

I was somewhat lucky, because this happened 15 minutes before the Technical Support Office at the Computer Center closed. So I dashed through the door, dropped on the chair, and cried heartily. I can never forget how kind the T.A's at the Technical Support Office were. They calmed me down and asked whether I was working on my proposal the previous day. I answered in the positive. They said they could restore that version not the one that I lost. They also told me that they always saved a backup copy of every student's work, as they knew students very often lost their work as a result of fatigue. I could not believe what I heard. He wrote the "restore commands" for me and said that my thesis would be restored 8:00 a.m. the next day. He added that if I did not get it at 8:00 a.m., they would make another request and I would regain my thesis at 11:00 a.m. I typed the "restore commands" right away, ran back to the Technical Support Office and begged the T.A. to

check and see whether I followed the steps correctly.

Soon, I went home. I was still in a state of shock, thinking of what happened and could not sleep that night at all. I was looking at the clock all night long and could not wait for the sun to come out. I ran to the computer center early in the morning and waited for the clock to strike 8:00 a.m. I turned the computer on, checked it and the thesis was there. I saved my thesis three times. I spent the whole day making the corrections that I made the night before. Later, every time I wanted to save my work, I stared at the keyboard with terror, hesitated and then made sure that I press the right key. I finished the corrections and had the 6 copies printed just in time. I carried all 6 copies and ran from building to building to hand the proposal to each committee member. By the time I finished, it was 5 p.m., the end of the day and finally gave a sigh of relief.

My experience with back Pain

As a doctoral student, every day I went to the Computer Center and worked on the computer for at least 13 hours non-stop. After that, I would go home, sit at my desk and write for few more hours. In total, I worked on my thesis for 17 hours a day. Seven months later, I started to have severe muscle cramps in my low back. Every time I bent to pick up something from the floor, I screamed of pain. Pain felt like a dagger poking my sides and back muscles. It felt like an electric shock. About 5 p.m., I could not stand up, sit upright or work at all. My back was killing me. I had to lie down on the floor for 2 hours, in order to rest my back and to be able to continue my work.

One Sunday, I could not leave my bed as my back muscles were trembling and I was scared to death. I thought there was something wrong with my kidneys. The following day, I went to see a doctor. She told me that people my age (I was young then) do not usually have low back pain. She examined me and asked whether I had a car accident, fell down or hit my back against something. I answered in the negative. She wanted to know what I was exactly doing. I said

that I was working on my thesis for 17 hours. "As long as you are doing what you're doing, your back would continue to hurt you," She added. She handed me a sheet of paper containing back exercises and asked me to take six aspirins a day. She advised me to adjust my chair, to take short breaks and go for a walk. I followed the doctor's advice. In addition, I used to go to the bookstore and read books about back pain. Books provided me with lots of tips about correct posture while standing, sitting and sleeping, kind of bed and chair one should sleep or sit on, how one should sit in a car or bus, and what exercises relieve back pain and strengthen upper and lower back muscles and abdominal muscles as well. I became more educated about back pain and started to change my posture and life style. Exercise became an important part of my daily routine not for luxury, but as a therapy and as a prevention of possible complications in the future.

Although my back pain is almost gone, I still have to watch my posture, the pillow, bed, and chair wherever I go. When I work long hours (which I always do), I move around for five minutes once every hour or so. I always remember the golden rule that says that prevention is better than cure

Losing My Father

It was Monday night and I was studying for a final exam that I was supposed to take the following day in the evening. My sister Fatma was in her last year of high school and my sister Rawda was a medical student. I was called for dinner. We all sat at the dinner table and were unusually quiet, specially my brother Mohammed. I was feeling bad as I had a bad dream the night before. In my dream, I saw a full moon appear among dark clouds and fall in the sea, in a stormy and cloudy weather. After dinner, I finished studying and went to bed. 4 o'clock in the morning, the doorbell rang. To our surprise, my uncle and grandmother had come from Riyadh.

The following morning, I went to school, as I was a teacher. In the school broadcast, the students read an article about death. When I went to class, I looked at the board and saw the word death on it. When I returned home, the gate was wide open and there were people in the house. I entered my room and to my surprise, my aunt was sitting on my bed. She had also come from Riyadh. Her eyes were red and swollen. I asked her why she had come from Riyadh and why she was crying. She said that she wanted to see us. I insisted that she tell me the truth. She said that my father had a car accident and that he was at the hospital. I started to cry and told her that I wanted to go to the

hospital to see him. She tried to calm me down and asked me to go to the reception room to say hi to the other ladies. There were many ladies and I did not know why they were there. An hour later, my oldest brother came after he picked up Rawda from King Abdul-Aziz University in Jedda, he hugged me and said that our father had passed away.

Shortly, my oldest brother came back and asked us if we would like to go downstairs to look at my father for the last time and say good-bye. He asked us not to scream. My legs were shaking and could hardly walk downstairs. But I wanted to see him so bad as I was his favorite daughter. I had to push myself as I thought that that was my last chance to see him and I wanted to see what happened to him as a result of the accident. I looked at him. His was pale, his head was wrapped in a white bandage and his eyes were closed. He looked so peaceful. I tried to get close to him and kiss him, but I could not. My hands were shaking.

My father was 53. He was strong and healthy. He used to go to Lebanon and Syria on business. Every time he went to there, he always filled the car with all kinds of gifts such as clothes, chocolate and baklava. He would arrive at night, ring the doorbell and never stop until we all wake up, and run downstairs to meet him. We would sit around him talking and laughing, eating and looking at the

gifts. But on this last trip, he was on his way home from Syria and Lebanon. He had reached Rabigh shortly after midnight. He was in his pick-up truck when it went off the road and rolled over several times. The police came to the site. They tried to find who he was, but could only find his driver license. So they called the police department in Mecca, who in turn called our store there. My brother, who was 20 at the time, was the one who answered the phone and knew about dad's death. He did not know what to do, so he called my uncle in Riyadh and told him about it, but he did not utter a word when he came home and was silent at the dinner table. The police collected as much as they could of the gifts that were scattered everywhere. The gifts came but my father never did.

After the funeral was over, I tried to study for the final exam that I missed hoping my instructor would give me a make-up test, but I could not concentrate. For six hours, I was trying to study one page, but did not comprehend a single word. A week later, I went to college, told my instructor and why I missed the final exam. I told her that I had not been able to study and asked when I could take the text. She said that I had to take it in about an hour after discussing the project with my classmates and suggested that I study in the time being. I started crying and thought I would fail for sure, as I was unable to concentrate. My classmates

gathered around me. Some offered to tutor me and others offered me their notes. But I felt that it was impossible to review the whole course in an hour. I was pretty sure I would fail. So I just cried.

After the discussion was over, I went in, helpless and hopeless. Instead of giving me a written test, my instructor started asking me oral questions about the course. She asked few easy questions and I was able to answer them all. I passed the course with an A.

When my other instructors knew about my father's death, they were so sorry and each gave me words of sympathy, wisdom and encouragement. I still remember Dr Farouk (my psychology instructor), who turned the mic off at the end of the class hour, and offered to be a father for my brothers, sisters and myself. Every time my sister Rawda needed medical books, he either got them from Egypt himself or ordered them for her and never accepted to be paid for the books. Whenever my sister Fatma was crying and unable to accept dad's death and the poor grades that she got in her final exams, he always offered to talk to her and made her feel better. When my brother Mohammed defended his thesis, he was the first one to come to the defense room. He sat there and waited. He always provided me with advice and he is the one who motivated me to pursue a Ph. D.

degree. Now he is retired and he is back in Egypt with his five children and grandchildren. Whatever success my brothers, sisters and myself I achieve, we owe to him. May god bless his heart.

Taking a summer course in Ramadan

When I was a student in the States, Ramadan used to come in July, i.e., in the summer of the early eighties. Ramadan days were so hot and so long then. I used to fast for more than 17 hours. Fasting started at 3:30 a.m. and sunset was at 9 p.m. The first Ramadan I was in the States, I was taking a statistics course in the summer and my statistics class started at 8:00 a.m. I used to wake up early around 7 a.m., get ready to go to class and then walk from the dormitory to the College of Education. Everyday I had to study, do my statistics homework (solve statistics problems) and get ready for my interm-tests. The highest day temperature was around 5 p.m. By 5:00 p.m., I always felt weak, hungry, thirsty, dizzy and about to faint and my legs could not hold me. However, I endured the hardships of fasting with pride. I never weakened, nor was I tempted to break my fast. I never thought of dropping the course, never missed a class, never complained to my professors and asked them to change the class time, give me a special test in the evening or exempt me of homework. I tried to cope and prove that a Muslim can fast, study and function like people who do not fast. I made sure not to walk in the sun and to be in the dormitory by 5:00 p.m. or before as it was too hot. Around 8:00 p.m., I would cook my Ramadan dinner in the small kitchenette in the dormitory. While cooking, some of my American friends used to chat with me about Ramadan. I would eat dinner in my room and sometimes invite some of my American friends to join me. After dinner, I used to study, eat my last

meal (sahur) at 1 a.m., and then go to bed. I would wake up at 7:00 and be ready to start my next Ramadan day.

Fasting Ramadan in the States was a new, yet invaluable experience for me. It is a real achievement. You feel proud that you could fast in such a hot weather for such a long time. It is a real test, a real challenge. It is a test, because you practice self-control, and it is a challenge because you never feel that it is Ramadan. People eat and drink around you, and you forget that you are fasting. Many a times, you would go to the water fountain to drink then remember that it is Ramadan. In addition, you never feel the spiritual atmosphere that you usually feel when you are in a Muslim country. You miss hearing the call to prayer. The only time you have a tiny feeling of Ramadan is when you go to the mosque in the evening or when you break your fast with another Muslim. In such a case, you feel the real joy of fasting and of sharing the Ramadan experience with another Muslim. Ever since I have returned and every time I fast Ramadan here in Riyadh, cherished memories of fasting Ramadan in the States flash in my mind, thanking Allah for the blessings that we all have but never think about nor appreciate.

Taking my comprehensive exams in Ramadan

The second Ramadan I was in the States, I was studying for my comprehensive exam, a test that a doctoral student has to pass after finishing all the courses and before starting to work on the doctoral thesis. Comprehensive exams were given 3 times a year, i.e., once per semester at fixed dates. Since I had finished my courses in the spring semester, I decided to sit for the comprehensive exam that was scheduled in the summer and which coincided with Ramadan. I only had six weeks to get ready for the comprehensive exam. Six weeks were relatively short compared to the amount of time other doctoral students spent preparing for the comprehensive exam. I had to review all the courses that I had studied before (all the books and handouts) and had to take 3 comprehensive exams in three areas: reading, applied linguistics, and statistics and measurement. I thought that if I postponed my comprehensive exams few more months, I would relax, and never study very seriously until few weeks before the exams. My friend Mona was worried about me. She did not want me to take my comprehensive exams in the hot summer and in Ramadan in particular. She thought if I did, I would fail. I told her that I was determined to take my comprehensive exams in Ramadan. If so, she advised me not to fast, as she thought that it would be hard to study and fast at the same time. But I was determined to do both in order for

Allah to reward me and help me pass due to the blessings of Ramadan.

Studying for my comprehensive exams was a great challenge and I liked that challenge and enjoyed it very much. I prepared my study schedule, and decided to study day and night. Studying and fasting was part of the challenge as the weather was extremely hot and the fasting hours were too long as well (from 3:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.). Having experienced hunger, thirst, fatigue and fainting in the previous summer, I took some precautionary measures to cope with those hardships. I used to leave my apartment around 9 a.m., walk in the shade, go to library where I had a study carrel, and spend the whole day there. In addition, the library was cool and quiet. I had a prayer mat and a pair of slippers at the library. I would study from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and would take short prayer breaks. At 8:00 p.m. I would go home, cook a quick dinner, break my fast, and chat with my roommate Samira for a while. I used to take a short nap until 10 p.m. then study until 3 a.m. and so on.

Another challenge was that my advisor was supposed to write the questions in the area of reading. Unexpectedly, she decided to give me a take-home exam instead of an in-class exam. So she gave me several challenging questions, which required lengthy answers. I had to go to the library and look for references (books and journal articles) to answer the questions. It took me two weeks to answer those questions and I ended up writing a 55-page research paper.

In addition to studying for my comprehensive exams, I was taking a

typing course at the community college. I wanted to learn to touch-type so that I could learn to use the computer later and type my thesis myself. I used to go to the community college 3 times a week for 2 hours. The course lasted for a whole month. Add to that the commuting time.

The six-week study period was over and it was time to take my comprehensives. Since passing the comprehensive exam was detrimental, I was extremely nervous and did not sleep very well the night before. I was up early and was at the College of Education in time. The comprehensive exam was supposed to be held at the auditorium. As I was waiting for the elevator, Dr John Connor saw me and could tell that I was very nervous. So he greeted me, smiled at me and said, "You'll be fine, Reema". His smile brightened my day and helped me relax. When I got to the auditorium, a large table was set outside with free coffee, tea, juice and cookies for the students. The students helped themselves to the snacks and drinks before entering the auditorium. I was reciting some verses of the Koran as I was entering the auditorium. I took my seat and soon I was handed my test booklet. As soon as read the questions, all my fears vanished. Each question was timed, and the given time was the exact amount of time needed for the answer. No time to think and no time to rewrite the answer if for some reason I decided to redo something. The comprehensive exam started at 9 and lasted for 3 hours. I was able to answer all the questions perfectly well. The following day, my second comprehensive exam went well. When my committee members graded my

answered, they found that my answers were impressive. They all expressed their admiration. I was thrilled when my advisor told me that I passed and as a treat, she took me out for ice cream.

Working on Ph.D. thesis in Ramadan

The third and fourth Ramadan I was in the States, I was working on my doctoral proposal and doctoral dissertation. I was living in a studio. I used to sit on the floor, lean on the couch, and write on the coffee table because of my back problem that I described earlier. For seven months my books and papers were open and scattered all around the coffee table. I used to work day and night trying to finish a 400-page dissertation. I got a lot done that Ramadan as I invested and managed my time very well. I did not waste time going in and out, nor did I waste time eating and preparing breakfast, lunch and dinner. I used to wake up at 9:00 a.m., take a shower and put my clothes on, tidy my apartment and then get started on my work. I would work until 8:30 p.m., prepare Ramadan dinner in half an hour, break my fast at 9:00 p.m., have tea or coffee and an hour later, I would resume my work. I would work the whole night until 3 a.m. At 3:00 a.m. I would eat sahur and then go to bed until 9:00 a.m. I took advantage of every minute of the day and by the end of Ramadan, I discovered that I have achieved more work than in non-Ramadan days. I did not have a T.V. set then. I used to listen to the radio so that I do not feel bored or fall asleep. I preferred to work in my apartment partly because it was hot and partly because I could concentrate on my work better. If I went out, I thought, I would be doing things that would waste my time like talking to people, going to the mall or hanging around. Sometime my friend Huda came over, cooked dinner and we broke our fast together. That

Ramadan was a unique month in my life. I had a specific goal. I had a purpose. I was never bored. I was never tired. My motivation was high, and my spirits were up as I was determined to succeed, determined to achieve and in the end I did.

A warm defense on a cold day

My defense was scheduled at 3:00 p.m., November 25, 1985. It was a cold and cloudy day and we were expected to have freezing rain for the first time in five years. Although I was excited about my defense, I was a bit nervous. So I went to my advisor for moral support. She was warm and smiling as usual and assured me that everything would be fine. She asked me not to be defensive if any of my examiners was critical, but rather to thank him for his comment and ask how I could correct the point and make it better. Moreover, she asked me to go to the library and find an article that one of my examiners had published, read it and be ready for any possible questions about it. So I did.

Around lunchtime, I went home, had lunch, took off my snow boots and put on a new dress and a pair of new shoes that my mother had sent me for the occasion. Since we were having freezing rain, slipping and falling down was very likely. I did not expect anything to happen and thought that I would be fine as I was not going to walk very far to the bus stop, which was only a few yards away from my apartment. I also thought that getting off the bus would not be a problem, since I did not have to walk a long distance to the college building.

After holding my thesis and other documents close to my heart, I walked slowly and cautiously on the grass. But the minute I set my foot on the sidewalk, I slipped and my elbow hit the sidewalk so hard. I felt an electric shock go through my whole arm and it started to hurt so badly. Despite the

pain, I got up, collected my papers and took the bus.

I got off by the mall, which was close to the College of Education, went to the flower shop, and bought a big flower bouquet for my advisor in spirit of appreciation for what she had done for me. I went to the secretary's office and asked her to put it in my advisor's office after leaving for the defense. I asked the secretary to make sure that my advisor does not see it, as I wanted to surprise her.

Shortly before I went to the Conference Room where the defense was to be held, my friends Jessie and Edith had a surprise for me. They gave me a flower bouquet and we took pictures together. Soon we headed toward the Conference Room. Although the defense is usually private, my uncle, and few of my friends attended my defense, as I was a foreign student. Soon, my six examiners arrived and we all sat around a large oval table. They all praised the high quality work I had done and expressed their admiration for how much time and effort I put into my thesis. My thesis was almost perfect. They had nothing to critique whether at the linguistic or methodological level. So they just asked me to give a summary of my study without orally and asked questions about how I could apply the results of my study in teaching ESL. I was able to answer all the questions with confidence and ease and as I responded to questions my advisor gave a sign of approval and admiration by smiling. Before the end of the defense, the guests and myself were asked to leave the room. So we left and waited outside. In few minutes,

we were asked to re-enter and my advisor announced that I had passed with distinction. Before leaving the room, my friend Duangrudi took pictures of me with my examiners. Then my uncle and friends hugged me and soon we all left, as it was 5:00 p.m.

Throughout the defense, I forgot all about my elbow and did not want the pain to spoil the occasion. As soon as I got home, I started to feel the pain in my elbow. I was unable to hold anything in my hand, even my coffee mug. The following day, I went to the clinic, the doctor examined my elbow and had some x-rays taken. There was no fracture, just a severe trauma. After a month, my elbow recovered, however, reminding me that roses always bloom among thorns.

Winter In Iowa

As a graduate student in Iowa, USA, I experienced different seasons: summer, spring, fall and winter. Each season was unique and had its own flavor. In the summer, the campus was always green with grass and tall trees everywhere. Days were hot, humid, and we occasionally had heavy rain and thunderstorms at night. In the fall, leaves turned yellow, orange and red. In the spring time, I could watch the trees blooming and wild flowers everywhere. People grew beautiful flowers in their front gardens and while walking along the sidewalk, I enjoyed looking at those beautiful home gardens. Winter was a special season in Iowa. We always had now, below zero temperatures, snowstorms and blizzards. Sometimes, we had clear skies with below zero temperatures. I had some winter incidents that I still remember. The day I defended my Ph.D. thesis, we had freezing rain. I did not know what it means to have freezing rain. Around noon, I went home, had lunch, and put on a nice dress that I had bought for the occasion. I took my winter boots off and put on a pair of high heel black shoes that my mother had sent me. I thought I would be O.K. as I did not have to walk a long distance. I left my home, walked carefully on the grass for about 20 meters and wanted to wait for the bus at the corner. The minute I stepped on the sidewalk, I slipped and my elbow hit the sidewalk so hard. My thesis and papers were scattered. I collected them while crying, got on the bus and got off downtown, walked down the hill cautiously and was praying not to slip again because of the freezing rain. After my successful defense, I went

home and my arm was very painful and it took more than a month to recover. On another day I wanted to go to the supermarket that was not too far from my place. While crossing the street, I slipped on the ice and in no time at all, I was lying on my back in the middle of the street. I was lucky, cars did not run me over. Despite those incidents, I always enjoy the snow especially when everything is white in the morning. I was always amazed whenever I saw some college students skiing on the frozen surface of the river together with the ducks. It always feels refreshing to walk in the snow and eat ice-cream.

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