

# Inventing the Nation: Technologies of Literacy in Afghanistan's Diverse Economy

Dr. Mike Edwards

words in **boldface type** indicate slide transitions

## Introduction

When I was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan, one of my English Department officer colleagues trained me up on the required protective gear and body armor. I elected not to carry a weapon. 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's right: there's an **incommensurability** there. For the Afghan instructors I worked with, their jobs were in some way worth their lives: it takes bravery for people to know they worked with Americans. It takes bravery for a female medical student to go to school at the National Military Academy of Afghanistan (NMAA, or nema) when she knows she risks 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's an education worth?

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. Afghans don't do business by email, for the most part. We 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 is the Test of English as a Foreign Language, and it's 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.

### **Definition**

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define **immaterial labor** as “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (290). For Hardt and Negri, “analytical and symbolic tasks” and “the production and manipulation of affect” (293) are varieties of immaterial labor. I believe the immaterial labor students perform in language and literacy learning, whether **L1 or L2**, constitutes economically valuable work, but not necessarily valuable in the conventional market-oriented capitalist way we think of value for exchange. During his tenure as the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commander, General Petraeus asserted that literacy is a necessary component of security in Afghanistan, and is also a significant component of the infrastructure ISAF is attempting to build over there, but there are significant challenges in promoting post-print literacy education in a largely residual oral culture. The massive nation-building effort ISAF is engaged in is in many ways an educational effort, especially in the focus that General Caldwell, Commander of the subordinate NATO Training Mission—Afghanistan (NTM-A), brings to the project. Caldwell writes that literacy “is a matter of **life and death** in Afghanistan,” and that it additionally serves as “the essential

enabler that addresses not only life and death issues, but. . . the ability to enforce accountability, the opportunity to attend professional. . . education, particularly specialized skills taught in technical schools and continued education, and the knowledge to combat corruption.”

What happens if we think about literacy education as immaterial labor in relation to General Caldwell’s note that in September 2010, “the NATO training mission ha[d] about 27,000 recruits from the Afghan army and police in. . . literacy programs at any given time,” and that “[t]hat number [would] grow to. . . 100,000 by June of [2011]”? Can we consider so-called stability operations to be a form of immaterial labor, and if so, what do we consider to be the product—the **economic output**—of stability operations in Afghanistan?

It depends on how far in the future one looks for the positive economic effects of having a stable government, one might well reply. But economic activity does not exist as economic activity solely because it has an outcome that can at some future point be exchanged on the market for cash value. Economic value must be understood beyond the myopic market-only perspective we too often rely on in discussing the function of literacy in economic globalization.

### **Problem**

Recent scholarship on language difference in the global influence of composition has offered a strong critique of the hegemonic role of technology-driven transnational “fast capitalism” in that influence. Such scholarship acknowledges the challenges associated with ethnic difference and usefully analyzes the complications associated with language difference within and outside the U.S. in its critique of what Min-Zhan Lu has characterized as “a world ordered by global capital, . . . where all forms of intra- and international exchanges in all areas of life are increasingly under pressure to involve English” (16). However, that scholarship fails to acknowledge the implications of **economic difference**: there is more than one form of economic activity, and much economic activity is non-capitalist or alternative-capitalist. The current situation in Afghanistan makes visible

the ways that market-based economic transactions exist in a broader context of feudal, theft, independent, slave, gift, and other forms of transactions and institutions of value.

## **Background**

More than a third of the population of Afghanistan is unemployed. More than a third of the population lives below the poverty line. More than three-quarters of the population is illiterate. In the modern era, the nation has seen various levels of conflict and war in the 30-odd years since December 1979. Electricity in downtown Kabul is intermittent. Most Afghans are polylingual, with at least some proficiency in **Dari and Pashto**, the two official languages. Balochi, Urdu, Nuristani, and Uzbek are not uncommon. A significant number of Afghans speak English.

I deployed to Afghanistan in January and returned in June of last 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 the “crown jewel” of higher education in Afghanistan. Our advisor team was under NTM-A as a part of 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 are 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 doctors earn about \$220 per month. Almost all of Kabul's remaining professional corps—doctors, programmers, librarians, professors, lawyers, engineers—who can speak English are working as interpreters, engaging in the immaterial labor of language use. Furthermore, the largest dollar-value contract in Afghanistan is not for providing gasoline for military vehicles, or for building roads, or for equipment maintenance. The largest dollar-value contract in Afghanistan is for **literacy instruction**.

Afghans are a deeply communal and tribal culture, and a deeply religious culture, and Afghan economics is deeply influenced by **Islam** and by the tribal and social nature of the culture. Afghans believe that God is just, and that life is often a matter of chance, dependent on God's will rather than on individual self-determination. Understanding the tribal and group-oriented nature of Afghan culture is essential to working with them. In Afghan students, I saw the same considerable cultural resistance to Western notions of autonomous individualism that has been described by many scholars working in the area of second-language literacy learning. Afghans are highly skilled orators, but uninterested in the abstract principles of rational argumentation, instead privileging the reliance on performance and rhetorical commonplaces characteristic of a residual oral culture. It took me a long time in working with Afghan faculty to understand that many face-to-face meetings and interactions were for **phatic** rather than transactional purposes, for maintaining bonds or reinforcing relationships rather than accomplishing tasks or moving the mission forward, and so required an entirely different rhetoric.

## **Frame**

The ISAF project in Afghanistan carries value in economic contexts beyond the market. Classical economic perspectives identified land, labor, and capital as the three primary economic inputs to the production of value, and examined how those economic inputs could be combined and transformed into other economic outputs. Today, in the information economy's context of

immaterial production that I'm addressing, the new inputs consist of material-technological capital (mostly computers in their various forms, which have replaced land as the new scene of economic production), immaterial labor, and immaterial capital (often understood as the intellectual property associated with the texts and songs and books and computer software that immaterial labor produces and that gets aggregated itself and reproduced into new forms of immaterial capital or embedded in forms of material-technological capital). Furthermore, the value produced from those three inputs changes form via three fundamental economic problems.

1. The **Substitution** Problem: labor can change its value depending upon who performs it, and depending upon who appropriates that value, and at what point in the cycle of production, distribution, use, and re-production. Economist Duncan Ironmonger writes about the substitution problem as manifested in the mis-measure of household labor when calculating Gross Domestic Product: despite the fact that household labor clearly has value inasmuch as we sometimes pay people to do it, we do not include estimations of the value of all the beds made, bathrooms scrubbed, floors mopped, and laundry washed in our calculations of Gross Domestic Product. Why not?
2. The **Transformation** Problem: we know that labor can become capital, and thereby take new forms in its contribution to the cycle of production, distribution, use, and re-production. Consider the person-hours the Afghans have contributed to building and developing NMAA in years past. Some economists would point to the ways their use of two of the factors of production—labor, in the form of their hours of work, and capital, in the forms of the buildings and computers and networks they used—were transformed into a product—the NMAA curriculum—that is itself used as a form of capital and an input absolutely fundamental to the production of the Afghan nation. How does that transformation happen?

3. The **Aggregation** Problem: we know that economists make assertions about how individuals act in ways that we generally characterize as economic, and we also know that economists make assertions about how large groups made up of individuals also act in ways that we generally characterize as economic. In the Cambridge Capital Controversy of the 1960s, Piero Sraffa and others demonstrated that generalizing from one to the other—from the individual to the group—is always going to be problematic, because one winds up comparing a whole bunch of different things (say, curricula, graduates, literacies) and aggregating them all together as “capital.” The same thing happens with labor. Aggregation necessarily implies mis-measurement and bad calculations, Sraffa argued, because in macroeconomic theorizing one will always be lumping together curricula, graduates, and literacies (not to mention beds made, bathrooms scrubbed, floors mopped, and laundry washed, some of which were contributing preconditions to the production of curricula, graduates, and literacies). What happens when we know we can’t accurately use individual behavior to talk about group behavior?

While these three terms and problems are complicated in their own right, they become more so when we examine them in an Afghan context, partly because of the way that culture shapes economy. American economic activity, while diverse, often takes place in a market-based context, whereas the Afghan economic activity outside of the major cities takes place in a largely material-agricultural and often feudal context. In this instance, *contra* Marx, cultural difference would seem to drive technological and economic difference. Immaterial production as understood in America consists largely of (1) the informatized production of material goods and (2) the market-based production of immaterial goods. Immaterial production as understood in Afghanistan is very different and involves—to a large degree—the circulation of cultural commonplaces with the purpose of maintaining familial, tribal, and intertribal bonds. Cash-based alternative capitalist transactions such as bribery and graft often function to reinforce tribal and **intertribal** bonds.

Afghanistan usefully illustrates to us the ways that economy often serves cultural purposes rather than the other way around, suggesting that Min Zhan Lu's concerns with the assumed all-consuming nature of technology-driven global capitalism are problematically exaggerated: the economic activity of immaterial production, like so many other things in Afghanistan, does not align with our expectations.

## **Technology**

One of the initiatives that the American mentor team undertook in Afghanistan was to provide the Afghan students at NMAA with laptops. This was a \$5.6 million dollar contract. Our expectation was that these material-technological inputs to the process of immaterial production would provide increased value and increased efficiencies in learning to the Afghan students in the ways that computers substitute capital-intensive processes for labor-intensive processes. The Americans who wrote that contract, as so often seems to happen, did not think much beyond simply throwing technology at the problem they perceived: they bought 17 pallets of **laptops** for the students, thinking that the Afghans would automagically internalize the years of aggregated experience Americans have had in our own technological culture. The Americans failed to see any need for instruction in computer use.

In response to this problem, I led an initiative to integrate computers into NMAA's curriculum and day-to-day administration, classroom instruction, and student classwork and homework. This initiative built upon the scholarship of Charlie Moran, Patricia Fitzsimmons-Hunter, and Cindy Selfe that demonstrated the need to attend as much to instructor training and education as to the technology itself. I polled NMAA faculty and incoming first-year students about their experiences with computers and shared my findings with the American Special Advisor for Computers and Automation Training and Education to the Afghan Minister of Defense. We used those findings to design an education program to instruct faculty in using computers before the

students receive theirs. My hope was that the program would ensure that the computers do not go unused, damaged, or sold—a genuine and potentially expensive risk in Afghanistan’s education- and resource-poor society.

The mentor team’s efforts in literacy and computer literacy education can be seen as ways to jump-start the process of aggregating immaterial knowledge production at NMAA, and to make that process ultimately self-sustaining. We wanted to make ourselves obsolete. But the Afghans’ need for computer literacy should remind us that scribal literacy and print literacy are themselves technologies that transform, substitute, and aggregate value in ways that don’t always align across cultures, and in ways that are not always in the service of market-based exchange: those modes of aggregation long predate post-industrial capitalism, and can be seen in the contexts of mercantile economics, feudal economics, and Islamic economics. In other words, even if the Afghans’ material-technological inputs begin to approach Western levels, they’re going to engage the process of production with culturally different forms of immaterial labor and immaterial capital. As I found out, some of our expectations and approaches were incommensurable.

### **Commensurability**

The abstract principles of rational argumentation are a form of commensurability in the way we suppose them to transcend context in the interest of transacting. Commensurability is the essence of market capitalism: the acid of money dissolves difference in market transactions, and it’s too easy to make the mistake of seeing English as a sort of global currency, as something that erases difference by rendering all things commensurable. There’s a deep conceptual link between seeing the market transactions we identify with capitalism as beyond question and seeing notions of a global “standard English” as beyond question. We too easily identify all economic concerns as market concerns, ignoring the enormous **diverse economy** constituted by communal and feudal and independent and gift and alternative capitalist practices, and thereby assuming that far too many

language practices are utilitarian and pragmatic and commensurable. Lu, Horner, Trimbur, and Royster contend that “notions of the ‘standard English speaker’ and ‘Standard Written English’ are bankrupt concepts. All speakers of English speak many variations of English, every one of them accented, and all of them subject to change as they intermingle with other varieties of English and other languages” (305), pointing toward the importance of acknowledging the incommensurability of language.

At the same time, in Afghanistan’s tribal culture, there is a need for commensurability: as Lu notes, “English is being used in multilingual countries... as a **‘link language’** for collective struggle against long and complex histories of intra- and international injustices along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class” (612). Those injustices have long existed in the ethnic prejudices that privilege Tajiks over Hazaras and reinforce pervasive misogyny; and play out in any number of social effects, from individually and group-enacted violence to economic discrimination. One hopes that the “translingual fluency” Horner et. al describe “as deftness in deploying a broad and diverse repertoire of language resources, and responsiveness to the diverse range of readers’ social positions and ideological perspectives” (308) might help in working against those intracultural injustices and toward **self-determination**.

In order to work toward such self-determination, Suresh Canagarajah argues, “[s]tudents must be trained to make grammatical choices based on many discursive concerns: their intentions, the context, and the assumptions of readers and writers.” He notes that “multilingual students will resist [standard English] from the inside by inserting their codes within the existing conventions. This activity serves to infuse not only new codes, but also new knowledge and values, into dominant texts” (Canagarajah 610-611). In Afghanistan, such activity—what Canagarajah calls “**code meshing**” (598)—happens not only among students and Afghan instructors but among expert dominant-language users like the multinational workers who would incorporate “Salaam” or “Sobh

ba khayr” or “Tashakor” or other Dari and Pashto phrases into their emails to me. Some Afghans would indicate their linguistic self-determination via such code-meshing in communications with their multinational counterparts, as well: we expect to see them taking their culture on their own terms, we are encouraged to see them start taking their security and political affairs on their own terms, and we should seek ways to promote them taking their own language policy on their own terms.

## **Mobility**

When I arrived in Afghanistan, I moved freely from my office overlooking the airfield to various classrooms and offices to mentor and observe the Afghan instructors, though that freedom of movement was circumscribed by the boundaries of the small campus, fenced on all sides, accessible only through checkpoints with gates, crew-served weapons, and armed guards. We drove past the airfield to get there: on one side the civilian Kabul International Airport that the Ariana and Kam and Safi jets fly out of with the few wealthy enough to travel on them, and on the other the helicopters and cargo planes of the Afghan Air Force.

I see similarities to the technology-enabled large-scale mobility of the multinational military presence there—the helicopters and cargo planes, flying missions and materiel and personnel beyond, within, and across Afghanistan—in the critique Horner and Lu (2009) offer of the formulation by which “success... is imagined in terms of the *extra-territorial mobility* achieved: the ability of the few across the world to constantly move, untied by emotion or responsibility to any one territory, identity, or career” (122). Transnational and transterritorial mobility is a marker of **privilege**, much as in Hawisher, Selfe, Kisa, and Ahmed’s deployment of “the term *transnational...* to signify a growing group of students who are at home in more than one culture... These students typically speak multiple languages, often including varieties of English from outside the United States, and maintain networks of friends, family members, and other contacts around the

globe” (56). This assumed privilege of mobility associated with the American fetish for cars and planes and so-called footloose capital is far different from the tribally and socially connected nature of Afghanistan’s deeply local culture.

Some soldiers at the airfield never went outside the gate: the only Afghans they saw were the KBR and Sodexo service workers and the merchants at the bazaar. The provincial reconstruction teams are able to get out and work closely among the Afghans, but that experience is rare, and many keep to their own enclaves, providing security against perceived threats rather than working with local communities, moving from place to place in armored vehicles, extraterritorial in the way they seldom engage people that populate and constitute the territory. **Borders** are by definition local phenomena, and extraterritorial mobility transcends the local in the worst way: by possessing the privilege and the outward security—the technological armor—to ignore it.

Fetishizing that sort of extraterritorial mobility and idealizing globalizations’ ability to move across and transcend local borders both strike me as problematic. In my work mentoring faculty and helping the Afghans to develop their own curriculum and pedagogy, I was most productive having tea with Afghan teachers in a tiny, overpacked group office with overflowing bookshelves, battered metal desks, and walls badly needing paint. What’s important is not the crossing but the places crossed; not the privileged transcendence of mobility that homogenizes space for the traveler but the inability to transcend—the **down-in-it-ness**—at the borders between heterogeneous spaces.

The “translingual approach” advocated by Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur in their 2011 *College English* opinion piece isn’t **translingual** at all: it does not pass by or transcend borders, but builds a nuanced understanding of how the borders work in their intersections and hybridity. Today’s Afghanistan is an arbitrary product of imperial modernity imposed upon a tribalism as old as memory, out of which the Afghans are building an identity that doesn’t look anything like the nationalisms modernity has known before. It’s provisional, tendentious, gracious, and sometimes

entirely counter to what Americans might expect or imagine or hope for. Historically, the strife has always come from Afghanistan's place as a crossroads: it transcends nothing, but is the geographic and cultural embodiment of down-in-it-ness.

Any understanding we might hope to build has to take the form of a sort of **rooted hybridity**, and won't necessarily be gained by those wearing body armor and traveling between bases in sealed armored vehicles. It's understood on foot, at the gates and borders and crossings between one place and the next.

### **Implications**

I've tried here to give a sense of what the context is for English language and literacy instruction in Afghanistan, and to show how that context complicates the privileging of concepts – technology, commensurability, and mobility – central to many of the ways we think about writing instruction in a global context. As I've suggested, I think rhetoric and composition as field has begun to do good work engaging with linguistic **heterogeneity** in that global context. According to Canagarajah, global Internet users are demonstrating “the mixing of not only different varieties of English but also of totally different languages. To be literate on the Internet, for example, requires competence in multiple registers, discourses, and languages, in addition to different modalities of communication (sound, speech, video, photographs) and different symbol systems (icons, images, and spatial organization). To capture these changes for textual processing and production, scholars have now started using the term *multiliteracies*... These changes in text construction make it easy to envision that different varieties of English may find a ‘natural’ place in the evolving shape of the text.” (612). Canagarajah refers here to the work of Stuart Selber, who uses the term multiliteracies in relation to computers as encompassing a “functional literacy” representing “computers as tools” and “students as effective users of technology;” a “critical literacy” representing “computers as cultural artifacts” and “students as informed questioners of technology;” and a “rhetorical literacy”

representing “computers as hypertextual media” and students as “reflective producers of technology” (Contents). My experience with a largely residual oral culture in Afghanistan, and with students and soldiers for whom print literacy was in many cases a relatively unfamiliar technology, showed me that substituting the word “writing” for Selber’s “computers” leads to interesting revisions of functional, critical, and rhetorical literacies.

Writing and computers are both technologies that aggregate and naturalize labor-intensive processes (language acquisition and mastery; document production and distribution) into capital-intensive processes (Google Translate; the Web distribution of hybrid Dari-English video mashups), and in doing so call into question the notion of expertise. It’s impossible for Afghans and Americans to be sufficiently polyglot autodidacts in their interactions, so our **mutual** understanding will necessarily be partial, provisional, and in process: the productive aggregation and transformation of knowledge is ongoing in the ways the Afghans are literally inventing the university and reinventing their nation. My mentoring work with the teachers, and the ongoing teaching practica I developed in conjunction with the Afghan English teachers are always acts of code-meshing, and never settled or static or authoritative. This is as it should be, as long as the Afghans keep engaging the process in their patient Insh’Allah way, and as long as the Americans continue to avoid thinking that participatory democracy is something that can be purchased via market transactions on a one-time basis and handed over to the Afghans as we close up shop.

However, many of the arguments we make about the economics of globalization rhetorically shut down the possibility of **economic agency** and self-determination that must be linked to linguistic and political self-determination by ascribing to technology-driven global capitalism a market-based homogeneity it does not possess. The languages we speak extend and carry value beyond the marketplace, beyond the bazaar, and tracing how they do so is absolutely essential to any hope of promoting the life-and-death matter of literacy instruction in Afghanistan. Performing that tracing

can illustrate for our field how the privileged rhetorics of technology, commensurability, and mobility are themselves contingent and necessarily dependent upon cultural and economic context in ways that we might otherwise fail to recognize or value.

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