

2020-2021 Technology, Innovation, and Education Program at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education

Personal Statement

Khawla was a shy, quiet Emirati student in my spring, 2019 English Communications class. Like her classmates, she came in with very little English proficiency. During lessons, I would look over to Khawla and she'd usually have a blank stare on her face. Her friend, Kholoud, would always sit on her right side and whisper in her ear. I would come over to her and point things out on her laptop screen to help her follow along with class activities. I simply assumed that Khawla's English level was far below the other beginners in the class and that she would need more individualized attention than her classmates. It was about mid-way through the semester when I discovered Khawla was deaf. Not only did I feel like a complete failure for not giving her a fighting chance in my classroom, but I came to the realization that I was ill-equipped to support special needs students and provide them with a classroom experience in which they could develop 21st century skills. Working in one of the most technologically-equipped federal universities in the UAE, I used all the technology at my fingertips to deliver, what I thought, were effective lessons. However, technology integration in classrooms does not automatically mean we, as educators, are meeting the needs of every student, especially those with special needs. This is why I am applying to the Technology, Innovation, and Education (TIE) program at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education (HGSE): because I want to learn how to leverage educational technology in innovative and creative ways to encourage 21st century skill-building for every student that walks in my class, regardless of ability.

I haven't always worked in high-tech educational settings but regardless of where I was, I always found ways to use the limited technology available to design effective and engaging learning experiences for my students. My journey started as a Fulbright Scholarship recipient at a binational center in the northeast of Brazil working with high school students. In a semester-long, script-writing project about their daily routines, I shuffled them back and forth to the computer lab where I would guide them on recording and editing their podcasts. I loved seeing them develop confidence in their voice as writers and speakers as I witnessed the impact a technology-enhanced curriculum had on student motivation and language learning.

In Tunisia, I had access to very limited technology in the classroom: a TV and DVD player. Yet, that was enough to curate meaningful learning experiences. In a class of high school students from Tunisia's poorest neighborhoods we watched the film "Ray" on DVD. We launched into discussions about the life and struggles of Ray Charles, about disability and America's history of racial injustice. We also discussed civil rights and democracy within the context of Tunisia in which students expressed their longing for freedom of expression and social justice. A few weeks later those students, and their fellow citizens, took to the streets in protest during the Tunisian revolution that would later kick off the region's years-long Arab Spring. I know it's a longshot to say that watching "Ray" and our class discussions inspired them to rise up, but I like to think that it helped them imagine, and work towards, a more just society.

When I started teaching young, pilot officer cadets in the UAE Presidential Guard I was taken aback by the bleak technology available to teachers and students: we had a computer lab, with no internet access,

that was covered in a layer of desert dust and sand. While working there, I completed a Master's degree in TESOL which endowed me with the skills to mentor new teachers; create curricula, lesson plans, materials, and tests; and develop a standardized speaking test to assess over 200 pilot officer cadets. However, my greatest accomplishment was getting students in the computer lab and having fun using DynEd, an interactive digital language learning platform whose user-interface looked like it was pulled from an early-90s video game. Needless to say, my Generation Z students, obsessed with Snapchat and Call of Duty, were not at all interested. I set up a competition with a leaderboard in the hallway with an announcement that the top cadets and the most active class on DynEd would get a positive spot report to give their commanding officer. Within a few weeks, they were putting in extra time clicking away at the computer, practicing speech recognition exercises in an effort to beat their fellow cadets for the number one spot. When it was time for speaking assessments, those competitive students increased their speaking score by at least a half band. Although I didn't have optimal education technology in this particular setting, I leveraged what I had in a way that produced positive learning outcomes for my students.

I believe that my unique experiences teaching internationally over the past 12 years, finding innovative ways to use technology to enhance student learning experiences have shaped the educator I am today and make me a suitable candidate for graduate study in the TIE program at HGSE. As of 2017, I have been teaching in the English Communications (EC) department at the Sharjah Women's Campus of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), the leading federal university system in the UAE with sixteen campuses located in five emirates. When I joined, I was incredibly eager and excited to discover the strong emphasis on technology and innovation that runs throughout every campus and department. I have taken over 200 hours of professional development in the last three years on educational technology tools and instructional design. By studying technology integration and evaluation theories like the TPACK framework and the SAMR model, I have been able to use educational technology in innovative and targeted ways to design instructional experiences that meet the needs and interests of my students.

In addition to the training I have taken in educational technology and instructional design, I have developed a keen interest in supporting learners with special needs. I have taught several students, like Khawla, who have special learning needs but, due to limited resources and teacher training, they often fall behind. In an effort to mitigate this, I took a 16-week, "Special Education Needs" course through the British Council, organized instructor-training sessions led by campus counselors on how to best support special needs students, and I started taking ASL lessons. I began advocating for special needs students by arranging special accommodations during assessment periods and helping them use assistive technology, like screen readers, so that they can fully participate in their classes. I have even written texts for reading assessments about Emirati Special Olympians and the Deaf Community to create awareness about individuals with special needs.

I also provide formal and informal professional training sessions to colleagues and give them direct support in the classroom and in the office. For example, when our college went online in the spring, several of my colleagues who struggle with technology integration contacted me for help. I designed screen-cast videos with Camtasia, set-up one-on-one tutorials over Zoom, and wrote instructional guides which they were able to follow and successfully implement in their online classes. While in quarantine, I had informal discussions with colleagues and learned about their innovative approaches to distance

learning, so I organized a 2-day forum over Zoom so that they could share their gems of knowledge with the wider HCT community.

During my short tenure here, I have made a direct impact on student learning, instructional design, and teacher training while doing all I can to best support special needs students and promote the development of 21st century skills. My immediate goals are to address these areas of need by: 1. Working with the Program Coordinators and Educational Technology Team to integrate 21st century skills into the curriculum so that students are working collaboratively using appropriate technology to solve pressing problems relevant to their lives. 2. Designing professional development courses about universal design for learning (UDL) and assistive technologies that will help my fellow educators create inclusive classrooms. I believe that the TIE program is the critical next step in bringing these goals to fruition.

Working full-time at HCT while undertaking graduate study at HGSE will allow me to immediately apply the theories I learn about in class to my specific context and obtain the skills necessary to mold the English Communications curriculum to inculcate 21st century skills like design-thinking and entrepreneurship. At HGSE, I hope to take Karen Brennan's course "Designing for Learning by Creating," where I will learn about constructionist theories of learning and how to design effective learning experiences where students are the creators of their own digital content. The skills I develop in David Dockterman's course "Innovation by Design: Projects in Educational Technology" will allow me to engage in the exact types of design-thinking processes that I want to implement in my own context at HCT. By cross-registering for "The Entrepreneur's Playbook: A How-To Guide for Start-Up Strategy" at Harvard Business or taking "Disability Rights Law" at HLS, I'll be able to gain a deeper understanding of the rights and accommodations of individuals with disabilities, while developing a framework to create a successful start-up in the UAE that innovates pointed solutions to deficits in services available to the special needs community. Through the Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching, my classmates and I could apply for pilot funds to test prototypes of innovative ideas we develop in class and compete in the HIVE Pitch competition. I could then apply to be an experienced Education Innovation Fellow to guide grad students in securing pilot funds to bring their own education-centered innovations to life.

Furthermore, I am excited about being a member of the online community at Harvard this year because I know I have a lot to contribute. I look forward to the possibility of being an Equity & Inclusion Fellow who will plan events that focus on inclusion and accessibility for individuals with disabilities and special needs students. I welcome the opportunity to facilitate relationships between HGSE and HCT in which HGSE students interested in field experiences would be able to conduct research and collaborate with faculty, instructional designers, and students at my institution. I also hope to meet other Harvard graduate students across all schools who are currently in the UAE, or the broader GCC area, so that we can organize networking events and create a larger physical presence of the Harvard community in the Gulf region during these uncertain times.

In the long run, with a Master's in Education from HGSE, I will collaborate with counselors, education technology specialists, and students to establish "Centers for Accessibility Services" in every HCT campus. An inclusive center where we put on events and programming to promote awareness of people of determination and their valuable contributions to the region and the world, create individualized education programs (IEP) for special needs students, and train HCT faculty and educators from across the UAE in

UDL and assistive technologies. With the entrepreneurial skills I gain at HGSE, I will launch my own EdTech consultancy that trains novice users of education technology in the best practices for tech integration and how to implement UDL principles in their institutions everyday. Most importantly, I will work towards a future where students, like Khawla, are fully included and celebrated so that they can dream big and have every tool at their disposal to make those dreams a reality.

Distinctions, honors, and awards, if any: | 1000 characters remaining

I have received recognition for my efforts in language teaching and extracurricular activities throughout my career. In my current post, I received Certificates of Appreciation for Innovation Challenge Coaching for the past three years. I also received a Certificate of Appreciation in English Language Teaching from the UAE Presidential Guard in 2014. While a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant at the Association Brazil-America in Recife, Brazil, I won a Curriculum Creativity Contest.

As an undergraduate, I was a McNair Scholar at the Claremont Graduate University (2006) and a Galbraith Scholar at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government (2006). I also won the Virginia Clauser Prize for Future Teachers and the Craddock McVicar Fellowship and Teaching Assistantship, which allowed me to undertake summer research for my senior thesis and serve as a teaching assistant in the course “Chicanos/Latinas in Education.”

Research experience, if any: | 1000 characters remaining

While working full-time as an English Instructor for the UAE Presidential Guard, I undertook a master’s degree in TESOL. For my master’s thesis, I conducted qualitative research on EFL teacher’s experiences with professional development in the MENA region. Based on the results of my research, I was able to provide feedback and make recommendations in how to structure a professional development program for the English Training Department.

As an undergraduate, I was a research assistant for Sociology Professor, Gilda Ochoa. I translated and transcribed over 20 hours of interviews with Latinx teachers in Southern California. This contributed to the research for her book, “Learning from Latino Teachers.”

For my undergraduate thesis, I won a Summer Undergraduate Research Program grant to conduct foundational research for my senior thesis about community building at a local charter school.

If you are proficient or fluent in any language other than English, please describe: | 1000 characters remaining

Growing up in a household of Cuban immigrants, Spanish was the language spoken at home and today is my second language. I studied abroad and lived in Brazil for a year as a Fulbright ETA, so I am proficient in Portuguese. While in Brazil and Tunisia, I took French classes at the local Alliance Francaise, and after

living in Tunis for over two years, I speak French proficiently. Currently, I am learning Arabic (Emirati dialect) and American Sign Language.

Hardship Statement: Anything else you want AdCom to know about you/your application

I would like to take this moment to paint a fuller picture about my history and personal circumstances that did not come through in other parts of my application, but which nonetheless have had a profound impact on my life path.

I was raised by a working-class, single-mother who emigrated from Cuba to Miami. My mother is my feminist icon who taught me what it means to be strong, confident, and resilient. She worked double shifts as a respiratory therapist but always woke me up for school in the morning. She moved our family to safer neighborhoods with better schools. All of my teachers would know my mother's name because she would be there on the first day of school, at every parent-teacher conference, and as a chaperone on field trips. She took me to zoos, museums, and libraries on the weekend to inspire a love of learning in me.

When we moved from Miami to Chicago, we settled in the working-class, largely immigrant neighborhood of Albany Park. It was a difficult transition at first, but, when I joined a youth-theater group, the Albany Park Theater Project, gathering real-life stories from our immigrant neighbors and creating original plays, I developed my social consciousness and my thirst to see change in our society. Their college counseling program for working-class, first-generation college students of color brought me to Pomona College where I delved into a transnational feminist theory and worked towards a more equitable public education system. All of these experiences have culminated in the life I have built for myself after graduation, living abroad and inspiring young people to strive for greatness, much like my mother did with me.

My mother's grit and perseverance has also helped me cope and survive living in parts of the world where being a young, single, western woman can be difficult. Because of her, I had the strength and will to persevere when I was trapped in my apartment during the days of the Tunisian Revolution and the confidence to stand-up to sexism I encountered working on a military base. It helped me speak up when negotiating my salary or my rent and to stand tall when encountering street harassment in my travels all over the world. I credit her for the strong, independent, and resilient woman I am today.