

Transcript: Building interactive learning environments - Interview with Rozhen Mohammed Amin

Mehiyar 0:00

Hello and welcome to Nahrein Network. Today I will be speaking with one of the recipients of the joint visiting scholarship scheme administered by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq and the Nahrein Network. Our guest today is Dr. Rozhen Kamal Mohammed-Amin, founder and head of the digital cultural heritage research group at Sulaimani Polytechnic University and lecturer in city planning. Hello, Rozhen.

Rozhen 0:21

Thank you very much. Thank you for having me. It's an honor and a privilege to be a recipient of the joint visiting scholarship from Nahrein Network and BISI. I'm an architect, I completed my bachelor's in architectural engineering, and in my masters and PhD in environmental design. I focus on museums. And actually since my Bachelor's also, I, my graduation project was about designing a memorial museum. And in my master's, I developed a proof of concept for Erbil Citadel about like, you know, this storytelling using technology. And then in my PhD, I designed and filled out a prototype for Heritage Park, a historical village, which is a living history museum in Canada. So as part of that development, what I did is actually develop this mobile application that enabled people to go to the park. And basically Heritage Park is like a park that has these historic homes from the first settlement in Western Canada, where some of the homes are replica, some are original ones. They are all brought into this park. And it's an outdoor museum. And they heavily rely on first person interpretation and human guides. So when it comes to developing that prototype called Heritage Park Portal, it's actually-the idea is it allows you to go to these, some target exhibits in the, in the park, that first application, as part of my research that I was assessing. And it enabled people to actually interact with, with, for example, different parts of the exhibit. So in, in three of the exhibits, there are targets, which are archival photos on the wall, where if by holding the phone, then this kind of characters within those photos come to life, and they start speaking to the visitor in a way that they engage them and tell them about their story. So this is an interesting and engaging way of telling you an interactive way for telling stories than just having someone just talk or read something. And other cases where someone when they go to part of the other exhibits. Then when they hold their phone, the alive characters show up, which is a human guide, kind of impersonating one of the old characters starting to tell the story again. I also assessed the impact of that application, the experience proved to be very enriching and very engaging for the participants of the study. So this is something that I really hope to explore in Kurdistan region and in the rest of Iraq when it comes to a museum and see how we can engage visitors and even attract other to museum premises through technology and interactive experiences. My host university will be Glasgow University, where I will be undertaking research and involved with their Emotive Project, which is an EU funded

project that involves using emotional storytelling with technology to engage visitors. Basically the Emotive Project is like a platform that can be used by other museums and cultural heritage institution. In my research there, I will be developing a prototype using Sulaimani museum as a case study. So before I go to University of Glasgow, I will be doing some introductory research where I will be collecting information from Sulaimani Museum. And while I am there, I will use that information to co-develop that prototype for Sulaimani Museum under the supervision of Dr. Maria Economou. And then after that, coming back and using and assessing the impact of that-

Mehiyar 3:45 And applying-

Rozhen 3:46 Yes-

Mehiyar 3:46

-best practices you learn from Glasgow University.

Rozhen 3:49

Yes, indeed. And this is to some extent, this is kind of an extension of my own work from my master's and then PhD in the University of Calgary in Canada, where I have been involved with developing proof of concept and later on a prototype initially for Erbil Citadel in Erbil, Kurdistan region of Iraq, and then later on for a living history museum in Canada. It's about using technology of augmented reality, to enhance visitor experience and assessing how that would affect visitors experience in museums and historic sites.

Mehiyar 4:23

And you're one of the few people to work on this in Iraq. It is not something that is readily available in terms of skills.

Rozhen 4:29

That's true, actually, for also, use of technology like augmented reality is new. And relatively it's a new field. It's an emerging technology. It has found its way to cultural heritage since early 2000. So the whole field in itself is new, and it's even newer for Iraq and Kurdistan region. But we hope that this will serve as a, as a case study and as a model for other museums to see the potentials of the use of digital technologies for emotionally engaging and involving visitors. And this is what I hope to, to explore through this research.

Mehiyar 5:05

And this could possibly enable a greater number of uses of the museums in Iraq.

Rozhen 5:10

Well, actually, that's the end goal. Because you see, technology is always like the medium, it's not the end goal. So the end goal is always to see how museums can exploit new technologies and new ways for engaging and informing visitors, because of the interactivity nature of these technologies, research show that people tend to be more involved, and they are enjoying their visit more. And we hope that this will help with raising the number of visitors to local Iraqi museums and starting with Sulaimani Museum as a case study. And of course, that's something actually I will be exploring as part of the research after developing the prototype. And when it become available for others to see how would that affect the number of visitors and also those who are visiting the experience like, you know, comparing their experience to others who have not been using it, something that I have done also, as part of my PhD. Mehiyar 6:02 And would you say the current situation in terms of museums in Iraq is characterized by the absence of a learning environment to facilitate this kind of user friendly museum experience?

Rozhen 6:13

Do you see- role and function of museum has changed from being store houses for artifacts and displaying it into active learning environments for people. With this philosophy is becoming adopted more and more by museums around the world, interactive technologies and other ways of engaging visitors not necessarily through technology, but I mean, in general, other ways that engage visitors, make the visitor experience more interactive, are being explored and adopted in museums. And that's why prototypes and application, we think it's possible that to engage visitors. And the end goal, like you know, like I said, is to educate and also entertain visitors who visit this museum. And this is fortunately something that is being increasingly adopted by other museum, because museums are, we are in a day that other functions and other things that are competing for people's spare time. And museums need to keep this role of being being the centers for where the places where people come and learn about something and also reflect on past and in order to inform their present, and future.

Mehiyar 7:26

Could you tell us a bit of about Sulaimani Polytechnic University? It's a government University?

Rozhen 7:30

Yes...

Mehiyar 7:31

How many students you have?

Rozhen 7:33 I think, 13,000 students.

Mehiyar 7:35

This is undergrad?

Rozhen 7:36

That's undergrad, and also we do have graduate programs. In fact, in my department, the City Planning Department, we also have graduate students, the number of graduate students is around 32 for this year, and eight of them are city, from City Planning department.

Mehiyar 7:52

And you founded the digital cultural heritage research group. When was that?

Rozhen 7:57

That's when I returned and joined the Sulaimani Polytechnic University. Because before my transfer, I was working as an architect and urban planner in Ministry of Municipality and Tourism. Since my move to like Sulaimani Polytechnic University, my, my goal has always been to open the research group. And this research group actually falls under the Research Center, which I also coordinate. And the Research Center is composed of a number of research groups. It's actually a first of its kind in Iraq. And the goal is tend to this new emerging field of digital humanity and using new technology in museum practice and cultural heritage.

Mehiyar 8:38

And the work of the Digital Cultural Heritage Research Group looks at practical ways in which we can be more sustainable in terms of cultural heritage, it is about sustainability.

Rozhen 8:48

You see, that the group itself is new. Currently, there are a few projects underway. And the main goal of it is to build skills around cultural heritage with people in particularly focused on young generation

Mehiyar 9:02

With capacity-

Rozhen 9:02

With capacity building, yes. And that's actually, and that's why we do have bi-weekly workshops related to training in research skills. And when it comes to our project that fortunately, we have won some grants that we will be undertaking soon. One of them is with Sulaimani Museum, the fund has been given by the US embassy, and that's to renovate one of the exhibits. Sulaimani Museum is the second largest archaeology museum in Iraq. And they do have very significant collections. So our work in partner with the Sulaimani Museum and Director of Antiquities, and Rashid International, that's an NGO, we will be helping them with, well, both research and developing a new exhibit. And so this is one of the very first projects of the digital cultural heritage research group. We do have another one for Saray. That's an old building that stands as a landmark in the city center of Sulaymaniyah. It's a heritage building that dates back to the very early founding of the city. Well, it's now in the process of being transferred to a museum, we will also have some project for that one. And then we do have some other ones that will we will be undertaking soon, which is kind of something we are very excited for these projects and to show models about the kind of work we are doing, which is research based projects. Because I think one of the issues there we have lack of good practices and models, and being an architects make me always pay attention to giving good models, where people can actually see, it's basically I will say, a materialization, or a realisation of a good idea. But when it comes to model, I get very careful about not only just the planning and the vision and over to the idea, but also the execution, because I have seen in the context of Kurdistan Region and Iraq that many great ideas die off, not because they are not good for the context. But actually because they are mistakenly or wrongly executed or not carefully executed, instead of giving a good model to follow, it creates a negative model where people can develop more resistance against new ideas. So that's why I'm being very careful with executing of ideas, I want to make sure that we are doing best practices, not only during the development and the design of a project or a research project, but also during the execution. And follow up, of course.

Mehiyar 11:18

And this is important because community engagement is essential, healthy, sustainable development.

Rozhen 11:24

In fact, in planning, now, its whole trend called participatory planning. And that involves community engagement. Because when people are engaged, they have something to share in that thing. So they want the success of that thing become part of their interest. So they are they tend to protect it more if it's if their opinion have been taken.

Mehiyar 11:43

What are your plans to engage local communities in your work,?

Rozhen 11:46

I call it local community engagement is one of those important emerging trends around the world. And it's actually not just something for that, like it's gaining momentum, because of the importance because, because of the impact and the effect that it has on communities, and also on the success of the project. So you see that idea of community engagement extend not only in the field of cultural heritage, it's actually we do have specific field in planning that's called participatory planning, that really look and seek for community engagement in any planning and large scale projects. And when it comes to cultural heritage, community engagement is very important. Because at the end of the day, cultural heritage is for people. And if people don't want to protect them, they are not engaged, then cultural heritage does not have that significance in terms of connection to its past. And then as a result that will even put cultural heritage in danger. Because when people are not engaged chances of protecting cultural heritage becomes low. So any sustainable development, and I would say sustainable protection and promotion of cultural heritage require a high degree of local engagement. So for our project, one of the things that we want to do is actually to have workshops, and also surveys that through them, we want to seek public opinion about exhibits and also analyze the factors about why people are visiting or why not visiting local museums, and what are the motivation of what someone who wants to visit local museum. And aside from those also actively seeking their opinion about exhibits, because we do have many research projects, and even in architecture domain, in planning and also in cultural heritage, especially in public outreach programs, public education, when they want to develop something they want to have people give opinions about those content, about the thing they want to see for museum to display or things museum to give in terms of information. One project that is in the top of my head is one in Netherlands, that involves using augmented reality for local engagement. And the idea was in this prototype, there was these different paintings, where they were asking people to take a role of a curator, basically, you know, you can geotag this painting anywhere in the city you want. And of course, the researcher was trying to explore then how and why people do these in these locations. So I mean, that's an example of public engagement within cultural heritage. And of course, there are many, many, many other

ways. Museums actually do engage public, and we are really keen about adopting some of those best practices in public engagement and local community engagement.

Mehiyar 14:27

Can you tell us more about the Sulaymaniyah Museum?

Rozhen 14:30

Yes. Sulaymaniyah museum was built in 1960s but then it was moved to its current location in 1970s. The Museum is actually the second largest in Iraq and the first the largest one in Kurdistan region. It collects and displays a number of significant cultural heritage objects and artifacts. And the museum is, because of the region and the provinces archaeological discovery in terms of prehistory, so that's one of the focus of the museum. And the museum has, has been closed between after the war with Iran and also during 1990s, which was reopened in early 2000s. And since then the number of visitors according to the museum director before 2014, it was like around 7000 average. If you compare that to the profile of other museums around the world, in terms of number of visitors, that's a very little number. Even those numbers that are coming out, they are mostly school children, that are being taken by their teachers, most recently, with the opening of a new gallery in, with the support of UNESCO. This is in general is the number is little even though it has increased after opening that new exhibit. But then after that, it dropped down again. So I mean, in general, the number of, the number of visitors are not that exciting. And that's why we think it's good that we have the museum director on board who'll, who's also very keen about modernizing Sulaymaniyah Museum, because actually, what I hear from them is that the look and design of the exhibit has been the very same thing since 1970s. And museums keep need upgrading all the time. And the fact that this is the like Sulaymaniyah Museum has not seen major renovation since then, is part of the problem. And that example of that small exhibit that has been developed with the help of UNESCO was actually. after that one year after opening that, the number of visitors doubled. That is one of the you know, the good example that shows that when museums actually do upgrade, there seems to be opportunities for bringing in more people and engaging more.

Mehiyar 16:42

Thank you Dr. Roshen for coming into the UCL office here. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

Rozhen 16:47

Well, thank you very much for having me.

Mehiyar 16:49

Hopefully, we will be seeing you very soon.

Rozhen 16:51

Thank you very much. Really. Thank you very much. Thank you.