

In-Service Religious Education Teachers' Perceptions of Online Learning: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The paper aimed at exploring the perceptions of undergraduate Religious Education in-service teachers at the University of Botswana regarding the use of Moodle in Religious Education teaching and determine its effectiveness as an online/e-learning tool. The study followed a qualitative research approach and used interviews to solicit teachers' views on their use of the MOODLE learning platform. The study found that Religious Education in-service teachers perceive online learning to be helpful because it enables them to take ownership of their own learning without the instructor following them. It also found that the participants' study skills are enhanced in terms of how they manage time and also enables introvert students to interact more. However, the participants also expressed challenges that they encounter in using the platform such as limited access to the university sites when they are outside campus.

Keywords: Online learning, Religious Education, in-service teachers, Moodle, creativity, learning management systems.

1. Introduction

The University of Botswana considered the introduction of online learning and teaching as an alternative as well as an addition to the face to face mode of teaching and learning in all its programmes. However, it has not been long since online learning was introduced at the University of Botswana (UB). WebCT has been the only online facility that was used at UB until recently when Moodle platform was also introduced on a trial basis. Moodle is preferred because its operational costs are lower compared to WebCT. Presently, the two platforms run concurrently and both staff and students are encouraged to use either of them to support tutoring and learning. Online mode is being rapidly embraced by most universities across the world because it has become an integral part of their educational strategies. It is viewed as being economical, convenient and has been found to have the capacity to enhance learning outcomes. Furthermore, online learning is said to enhance creativity in learning because students have access to information and can manipulate data in various ways. It also affords students a lot of opportunities, for example, by offering novel and innovative ways of delivering and receiving information.

Technology has had a dramatic impact on teaching and learning in higher education and has been responsible for students' creative abilities as they engaged in learning. It has promoted students' sense of creativity in various ways by enabling them to do certain tasks which they could not do without technology. For example, students could use technology to communicate and do collaborative tasks without the barriers of classroom walls and paper textbooks. Technologies provide resources that make learning environments in schools more plausible than it previously has been. In this way, it may allow students to be active participants in learning which is self-directed while they become creative by being responsible for their own progress and becoming co-constructors of knowledge (Dale, 2008; Moyle, 2010; Henry, 2005). Learning management systems which use technology enable students to personalise their learning opportunities, by putting students in control of the pace of their learning. Online learning may also promote self-discipline, good time management, and solid computer skills (Billings, 2007) while the bulk of learning is done on a self-directed basis with limited contact with tutors (Moyle, 2010). Furthermore, if students are to know that their tutors have faith in their abilities through the use of technology, they are likely to take interest in facilities that use technology and hence develop a sense of creativity in their learning. Self-directed learning promotes a sense of ownership of the learning activities and enhances higher order thinking skills rather than solely depending on tutors and this promotes a sense of self-assertiveness and empowerment. If students feel empowered they can move beyond being a store house of facts and could synthesise concepts in a creative way. Even though technologies immensely do assist educators reach out to individual students, they certainly cannot replace human interaction.

2. Creativity in Learning – A Conceptual Framework

2.1 What Creativity Entails

Creativity is a difficult and contested concept (Dale, 2008) for which there is no agreed upon comprehensive definition and it “still remains mystifying and enigmatic” (Beattie, 2000:175). It entails creating something that is both unique and original in terms of newness, novelty and usefulness (Donnelley, 2004; Jackson, 2006). Creativity involves a sense of imagination since it is about creating something new and not simply repeating what others did before. Creativity involves a completely new way of looking at things by synthesising ideas while aiming at producing something new, interesting and possibly valuable. In addition, it involves making use of the knowledge and experiences of the world by asking new questions. However, creativity is at times taken for granted hence rarely nurtured.

According to Ferrari and colleagues (2009) creative learning is viewed as “any learning privileging understanding and meaning-making over memorization” (p. 362). However, for creativity to grow there has to be a supportive environment that promotes enquiry, reflection, and criticism (Dale, 2008). As students learn, they certainly make meanings of how they understand the world as well as being able to articulate their meaning-making of the world instead of viewing it from the perspective of the educator. When students have the freedom to decide what to do or how to accomplish the task, they develop a sense of control over their own work and ideas and especially if they are given the opportunity to explore new avenues on their own. For that to happen educators need to relinquish a large part of their authority whereby their role as the purveyors and arbiters of knowledge changes and they instead become guides in knowledge construction. The success of creativity takes place when students are stimulated and can find ways to physically play with their interests as well as challenges because it is natural that when people do something new they become contented and enthused with their new found creative possibilities and potentials.

Creativity can take place in an enabling environment whereby all the support mechanisms and conditions are available and where educators could show students that they value who they are in terms of how they make sense of the world. By so doing the latter can widen their range

of perceptions. If students' creative abilities are recognized and valued their academic performance is likely to improve especially if they are shown that their responses are a result of their independent thoughts and initiatives. If the environment is conducive for learning then creativity becomes a natural result in terms of enhancing self-esteem, which gives students a sense of motivation and achievement. For example, students who are encouraged to be creative become interested in investigating and discovering things for themselves, and eventually take control of their own learning. Encouraging creativity in students, for example, by respecting their ideas enables them to have a sense of self-worth and self-determination and are likely to mature to a point where they may be able to question some assumptions that they and others have taken for granted which is a sign of critical thinking. In that way, all students have the potential to be creative (Ferrari et al, 2009) since learning itself is necessarily a form of creativity. In a positive classroom setting one is allowed to be creative without feeling bad and threatened by the environment. After all, creativity entails freedom to fail and risk-taking (Dale, 2008), a sense of curiosity, open-mindedness and confidence to try new ideas. This is in contradiction with the thinking of modern society that maintains that it is unforgivable to fail, to make mistakes and worse to admit making mistakes. Furthermore, little does it dawn upon people that mistakes are educational since one can learn from them and further refine their thoughts which may lead to a new discovery or success.

However, creativity does not necessarily depend on recognition or acceptance by others because a creative act or idea may or may not be given the seal of approval by others and that others may view it as immoral especially if its outcomes are deemed unethical (Fisher, 2002). When creative ideas are proposed, they are often times viewed as bizarre, useless and even foolish, and summarily rejected while the person proposing them may often be viewed with suspicion, disdain and even derision mainly because they defied and questioned the societal assumptions (Sternberg & Williams, 2008). Creative people are usually viewed by society as annoying and offensive since they defy the status quo. However, people usually do not realize that creative ideas may represent a valid and superior way of thinking. That is why in many cases creative ideas are rejected because being creative is to break rules honoured by culture since it entails a new fresh look at what is known, exists and taken for granted.

Technology can influence creativity in students in that it supports innovativeness due to its facilities that are interactive, use less human energy, operate at high speed and with reasonable accuracy. The use of online platforms actively involve students in learning hence they tend to motivate them. For example, students make choices about how they access and process information and such choices open up a world where they could explore and construct knowledge. In addition, the use of technology makes learning to be fun as it enables students to explore new ways of doing things. In this way students become co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Moyle, 2010).

2.2 Schools as 'Anti-Creativity' Institutions

Society always suppresses creativity and encourages intellectual conformity especially through the school system. Schools tend not to nurture students' ability since they stifle, constrain and inhibit creativity when they adopt the "right answer" approach which has a negative effect on learning. Educators have a tendency to prefer correct standard answers due to fear of committing mistakes and this fear hinders opportunities to develop new and creative skills" (Ferrari et al 2009:395). Operating as if there is only one answer makes one to stop thinking and this leads to lack of creativity. Wrong answers are not acceptable and an attempt to solve a problem outside the boundaries of the 'right answer' approach is generally not welcome in schools (Moyle, 2010) and that is why it can be said that the school system is engaged in a conspiracy which is aimed at quashing creativity. By discouraging creativity the school system promotes regurgitation whereby emphasis is on answers, facts and conformity. Discovery, raising of questions, individuality and uniqueness are on the whole discouraged

yet they are the main components of critical thinking. School systems discourage students who question, challenge and are curious. That is why the classroom today constrains and isolates students from their personal experiences which are a source of creativity (Machnaik, 2002).

Schools deny students the opportunity and ability to ask unusual questions while committing error is avoided at all costs. Creative students who tend to be inquisitive in class are always in trouble with teachers because they are accused of talking too much. Naturally, as students get involved in learning which is a form of innovativeness and creativity, they will certainly make mistakes which is a natural and a valuable element in learning. As a result, the education system does not promote an environment that encourages risk-taking as a way of enhancing creativity in learning.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Online Learning in Institutions of Higher Education

Online learning involves the access and use of the internet in learning using platforms chosen by an institution (Jones & Warren, 2009). Online facilities enable tasks to be easily carried out and feedback given, using various communication tools to organize information and support effective learning such as emails and discussion forums while the aim is to put the student at the centre (Tutunea, Rus & Toader, 2009). Jung (2001) and Daly (2006) note that online education can be understood as a form of education that delivers instruction to a remote audience, using computer networks especially the internet to improve the quality of learning. It is a form of electronic learning whereby communication and learning activities are executed through computers and uses network technology to design, deliver, select, administer, and extend learning while the content is typically developed with the aim of engaging students as well as being interactive. One of the main purposes of online education is to remove barriers of time and space (Davis, Lennox, Walker & Walsh, 2007) while regular physical attendance and eye-to-eye contact with the tutor is not necessarily required. Studies show that students rate online classes as greatly superior to face-to-face classes in terms of convenience and allowing self-pacing (Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kishore, & Tabrizi, 2008; Leo et al, 2009). The use of technology in educational settings has been found to positively affect learning (Jones & Warren, 2009) due to its convenience in terms of offering easy access and flexibility of information and has become an ideal delivery vehicle for teaching and learning especially in institutions of higher education. The strength of online learning is its ability to enable flexible access to information and resources to both tutors and students. Flexible access entails the use of information and resources at a time, place and pace that are suitable and convenient to individual students rather than to the tutor (Moyle, 2010; Roper, 2007; Veerasamy, 2010).

In adopting the online learning the aim has always been to allow students to do assigned tasks at their own time and place. In addition, those students who may not be assertive may find time to express their own views without the presence of the tutor and their fellow students (Sumathi, 2010). The students and tutor both share and create knowledge hence making the role of the tutor as a 'sage' become less emphasised because students have access to sources of information. In such an environment, it becomes not unusual for a tutor to learn from the students. Dialogue is a central component in an online learning environment. Through dialogue there is a visible interaction between the tutor and the students, for example, the tutor provides constant feedback on tasks undertaken as students endeavor to achieve the task (Sumathi, 2010; Kern, 2006). The interaction is visible for both parties through the learning management systems which will be in use.

Learning management systems used in online learning share some common features, for example, students may be able to access their course grades as soon as they are posted,

wherever they are and also at any time. Furthermore, in both synchronous and asynchronous learning environment, there are different types of communication that can be seen, accessed and observed by tutor and students. Users can post queries, announcements, and comments on the board, and all these will become visible to all authorized users. However, the tutor normally has more privileges such as uploading content, setting examinations, evaluating submissions for courses while student privileges might be limited to viewing content, answering task questions and engaging in forum discussions. Most online platforms provide tutors with tracking options to allow them to see and monitor when and how often the students log in and what they do when they come online. This allows the tutor to identify, assist and advice those who may be weak, missing instructions or taking the course lightly. In this way, the system operates like a conventional classroom where a record of attendance is kept and class interaction monitored (Leo et al, 2009).

3.2. Pedagogical Considerations of Online Learning

Studies show that there is value in engaging in online learning (Zake, 2008; Ng, 2007) which is mainly aimed at using learner-centred pedagogies through the provision of efficient delivery modalities that offer students greater time flexibility which is aimed at improving learning outcomes (Alebaikan & Troudi, 2010; Hall & Pittman, 2006; Sumathi, 2010; Vaughan, 2007; Verkroost, Meijerink, Lintsen and Veen, 2008). However, if the tutor cannot create worthwhile learning activities online learning may degenerate into the traditional mode where the tutor still maintains the role of being an expert and a purveyor of knowledge. It then becomes the responsibility of the tutor to create the learning environment that motivates students and facilitates worthwhile learning activities that lead to expected and desirable outcomes. However, instructional techniques and strategies in online learning are mainly shaped by various factors such as the bandwidth, hardware and by environmental factors in terms of budget, time, and organizational culture (Clark, 2002). Studies indicate several challenges encountered in online learning (Beaudoin, Kurtz, & Eden, 2009; McNaught, Lam Kin-Fai Cheng, Kennedy, and Mohan, 2009; Zake, 2008).

3.3. Challenges of Online Learning

There are many complex tasks and challenges that tutors face as they intend to maximise the educational outcomes through online learning. Online learning may lead to overlooking the pedagogical and educational intentions, especially since it involves diverse learners with different cultural backgrounds, communicative skills and expectations. The tutor's lack of knowledge to design tasks meant for online tutoring and learning and how to monitor various tasks assigned to students may be a challenge (Álvarez-Trujillo, n.d). For example, if a student becomes non-communicative and withdrawn from collective activities and participation, this can indicate that they may be falling behind because something is hindering their performance (Bray, 2010). In addition, when students are dispersed geographically establishing a common ground may not be easy due to various roles and responsibilities assumed by both the students and tutors. Many of the techniques used by tutors in face-to-face classes cannot be employed in an online class since they belong to a different mode of communication and interaction. For instance, in a traditional face-to-face classroom it is clearly observable because there is a short distance between the tutor and students since the physical proximity allows glances, head nods or eye contact (Leo et al, 2009; Tran, Raikundalia & Yang, 2006). Generally, there is less verbal interaction between tutors and students and amongst students themselves hence a feeling of isolation by some students. In addition, lack of self-discipline in terms of being able to work independently and manage time in a reasonable manner may result in the student not coping with the work (Alebaikan & Troudi 2010).

Another challenge lies with the synchronous online discussions when students have to wait for others to read and respond back to their bulletin board posting or e-mail messages and this delay may cause anxiety. At times, the pace of discussion might be too quick for some hence the opportunity to participate may be lost. The other challenge is when instruction or feedback posted online from the instructor is not clear. Resistance to change to a new mode of learning due to the users' limited technical information literacy skills (Aman, 2010; Mahrenholz, 2012; Sumathi, 2010) could be another challenge. A negative attitude born of a culture that is not immersed in technology can be a setback too especially in developing countries where electronic gadgets may not be easily available. For example, some students may be ill at ease in using technology in terms of accessing and utilizing the resources needed for online learning. In addition, those who are expected to technologically assist and support the students may not be helpful enough (Mahrenholz, 2012). Poor network and power failures are some of the challenges. Due to the several challenges encountered in a purely online learning mode there is the need for a blended mode of learning which has always been preferred.

3.4. Blended Learning Mode

Online learning on its own has its own benefits but effectiveness is increased when it is blended with face to face learning (Ahmadpour and Mirdamadi, 2010). The blended learning mode takes account of different preferences of learners, for example, satisfying the desires of those who prefer personal and those who derive comfort in independence and flexibility within a supportive and collaborative online environment. The blended mode is what the University of Botswana has presently adopted by attempting to balance the two modes. However, the tutors' role is still important in encouraging online class discussions since just like the face to face mode it is tutor-led. This mode can be challenging to both the tutor and the students regarding how activities are managed.

4. Methodology

The participants were fourteen (14) in-service secondary school teachers (three of whom were males while eleven were females) and all were pursuing a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree in Religious Education at the University of Botswana and had teaching experiences ranging between 7-14 years. They were introduced to online learning for the first time in their two year BEd programme. None of them had prior knowledge and experience of online learning and they each had inadequate computer skills. Before using the Moodle platform, they were introduced to an awareness session by the Information Technology (IT) support staff on how to use the facility and how to search for information as a way of further equipping them with learning skills. After the sessions, the tutor posted chats and assignments to students online. Assignments were marked and comments included and posted to students online. In addition, reading notes and handouts were also posted. Even though the participants did not openly resist they were reticent at the beginning showing signs of inadequacy, discomfort, uncertainty and lack of assertiveness in engaging with the Moodle platform.

A qualitative case study research method was adopted because it provides thick and rich descriptions. This methodology entails observing the experiences of the participants while it aims to understand their actions and reactions either as individuals or as a group. The qualitative methodology often works with small samples of participants within their context while studying a phenomenon in-depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Samples in this type of methodology are often purposeful because they entail rich sources of data that are sought by the researcher (Rezaei, 2009). In this study interviews were conducted with the participants to solicit their views regarding learning RE courses online. Semi-structured interviews were preferred because they are a flexible mode of collecting data as they allow further exploration of issues and allow an examination of unexpected issues that may arise during interviews. The participants were implored to express their views and reflect on their experiences regarding

online learning of Religious Education at university level. The purpose of the study was explained and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice on their part. The participants also agreed to have pseudonyms used as a way of concealing their identities. Interview questions focused on prospects, unique challenges and possible solutions of learning online. The interviews lasted between 20-30 minutes and were recorded using a digital tape-recorder and were later transcribed and coded for data analysis.

The study aimed at exploring the perceptions of in-service RE teachers about their use of the Moodle platform and was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the strengths of the online learning pedagogical tools in RE classes?
2. What are the challenges that in-service RE teachers face when using online learning pedagogical tools in RE courses.
3. What are the possible strategies in overcoming the challenges in-service teachers face when using online learning pedagogical tools in RE courses?

5. Discussion

5.1. Prospects of the Online Mode of Learning: “*I can learn even when the tutor is not there*”

At the beginning, there was both fear and anxiety when the participants were introduced to the Moodle platform but later they showed enthusiasm to online learning by emphasizing that they were able to interact easily with both their classmates and the tutor. They expressed the benefits of online learning by indicating that technology opened new horizons that they never thought were possible. They further indicated that the Moodle platform was very interactive because they were able to see their marks and the comments made by the tutors online. In addition, they were happy that their computer skills had immensely improved through their engagement in online learning especially since they could use different search engines to help do their assignments. For example, Major, Betty and Georgina expressed their positive views about online learning.

Major: *I have learnt a lot in online learning and teaching, I have learnt to post my assignments, chat with classmates. I can now use different search engines to do my assignments. It helps me even when preparing for my examinations. My phobia in technology is now gone.*

Betty: *It is efficient, cost effective, time saving and effective. It makes learning very interesting. I easily access information since I am now exposed to different forms of technology which I did not know before. It makes my learning very interactive and enjoyable.*

Georgina: *It is cheap and convenient in terms of time and money. There is no need to travel to campus since I can learn wherever I am. I am not under pressure to print handouts since I can access them anytime I need them.*

The participants further indicated that they could easily access resources and materials sent to them by their Religious Education course tutor and were able to consolidate them with what they learned in the face to face class. As a result of this, learning tended to become fun to them especially since in their view it was learner centred. According to the participants online learning is convenient because it could easily be accessed at anytime and anywhere. Betty expressed the unique advantage of online learning when she said that it is “very interactive because I don’t even feel intimidated by the presence of the tutor and other students”. The advantages of online learning were also echoed by Teresa and Barbra.

Teresa: *With online learning students can learn wherever they are, without necessarily going to the physical classroom provided they have access to internet. Students can communicate with whoever they want to talk to. For example, I always have discussions online with the tutor and other students doing the same course.*

Barbra: *I can learn even when the tutor is not there and submit my assignments wherever I am and at anytime. I also can now access a wide range of sources of information.*

The participants demonstrated the strengths of online learning pedagogical tools in RE courses. For example, Sarah and Ted agreed with what Barbra said when they indicated that they could search for information related to their Religious Education assignments and other courses on their own without external assistance. Macko also indicated that through the online mode he could ask questions without physically facing anyone including the teacher and that it “was rather old-fashioned to hear names being called when papers were given back to the students” by the tutor. In addition, Betty said that as a group they no longer visited the tutor’s office to get their test and assignment papers. She said “what I have to do now is to press a button to see how I performed in the tasks given to us”. However, the combination of online computer-aided learning and the tutor-led face to face was favoured by the participants.

5.2. Challenges of Online Learning: “Moodle has a bias towards tutors”

It is evident from these findings that even though there were positive aspects that the participants reported, there were several challenges in using online facility. Online learning tended to be a challenge in some fronts due to inadequate technology literacy skills of the participants. For example, Maggie was of the view that students should be given a thorough orientation on the online learning before being expected to carry out any task using any learning management system. The participants reported that when outside campus they did not have access to their students’ mail, experienced network problems, power failures and that some university links were not accessible.

Sarah: *We are unable to access student mail when outside campus. At times there are power outages especially outside campus.*

The participants were unhappy that few tutors had posted their courses on online platforms. For example, Barbra complained that “all could be well if all lecturers could make use of the online mode”. There was also dissatisfaction expressed regarding the one-way communication and tutor-control and tutor-led functionalities of the Moodle platform. The participants complained that the Moodle platform was limited since it had a bias towards the tutors hence limiting interaction and dialogue by not allowing students to initiate a discussion. Some participants were not particularly keen in online discussions and in initiating and raising discussion questions in online tutorials.

5.3. Solutions to Challenges on E-Learning: “All courses should be offered online”

Participants were asked to suggest solutions to the challenges that they encounter when taking their RE courses online. They suggested various interventions, for example, that there has to be a thorough orientation on how the Moodle platform works and that all lecturers should use the online mode in order for students to internalize it and for it to become a university culture. Pako was of the view that “all courses at university should be offered online”. The participants also suggested that the orientation on the use of online learning should be done by tutors who understand better the needs of the students and not by the IT support staff as it is presently the case at the UB. Participants were of the view that Moodle functionalities should

be set in such a way that they would allow students to initiate discussions. The participants further suggested that the services should be extended beyond the university so that they could access their student mails wherever they were. In addition, they suggested that students should be given wireless internet modems so that they could work even outside the university premises.

6. Conclusion

The findings suggest that in-service undergraduate Religious Education teachers are positive about the use of online learning mode. The online mode has potential if it is integrated with the face to face classroom-based RE teaching as is presently the case at the University of Botswana. However, the participants encountered several problems such as downloading learning materials, a slow network transmission and lack of access to some university sites when they were outside campus. The study concludes that it is necessary that both pre-service and in-service teachers be exposed to basic skills in integrating computer use in their classrooms because technology tends to expand the horizons of learners' knowledge. Furthermore, teachers who are equipped with online skills could use them in their schools where there is little time to cover the syllabuses. Lastly, it is important to note that the use of technology can empower and enhance learning in relation to creativity which has to be at the heart of school life.

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