The challenges related to offering of online teacher education programmes: A study in a Maldivian university

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Abstract

The Maldives with its geographical uniqueness (a chain of islands spread out and far from each other), could place e-learning in a central position to offer higher education opportunities for teachers. This paper explains challenges associated with offering of online teacher education programmes in a Maldivian university context. The study adopted an ethnographic approach, gathered data from eleven teacher educators through interviews, focus group conversations and hanging out approaches. The findings highlight a number of challenges related to geographical, infrastructural and cultural. These challenges were analysed via Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) attempting to understand the aspects involved in the practicality of offering e-learning programmes in this specific context. The paper contributes to understanding the limitations related to online programmes in small island communities and specific cultures. While using three forms of capital to examine these factors, this study provides a new theoretical understanding for designing e-learning in various contexts.

Introduction

The Maldives is a small country, which consists of a chain of 1196 coral islands from the north to south in the South Asian Region. It is known as one of the most dispersed countries in terms of its geographic nature. The islands of the Maldives are divided into atolls, as seen in Figure 1. Its culture represents two aspects: the religion, Islam and the language, *Dhivehi* (has limited uses via digital technologies due to its special alphabets). The religious principles and practices have been deeply embedded in Maldivian traditions over centuries including education and social lives. This also means that a certain traditional model of teaching (teacher-centric) is being established due to this religious influence (Author, 2014; 2015).
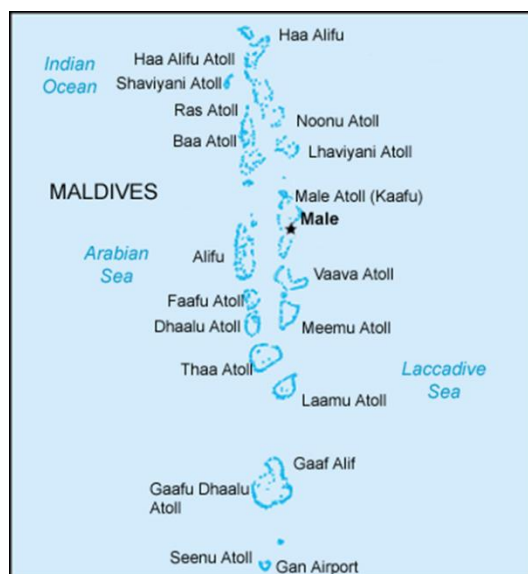
Figure 1. The map of the Maldives. Source: www.intercultures.ca

The Maldives has taken the lead in terms of e-government readiness, ranking among South Asian countries (Rahman, 2010). However, the use of technology in the education sectors is still limited. More specifically, the people who live in other islands use these facilities sparingly. Hoque, Samad, Siraj, and Ziyadh (2012) claim that technology infrastructure designed in schools is mostly used for administrative work purposes such as preparing reports and searching for teaching resources. Often, this is difficult due to slow Internet speed and the lack of technical support (Riyaz, Rijal, Shrestha, & Nashfa, 2012). Given the unique Maldivian context with the geographic, cultural and technology infrastructure, it is crucial to understand how e-learning programmes could be offered in this context.

E-learning is defined as "instructions delivered on a digital device such as computer[s], or mobile devices that is intended to support learning" (Clark & Mayer, 2011, p. 8). Bates (2005) argues that the main development of e-learning occurred through the rapid expansion of the Internet, in which it allowed to offer a range of digital materials to be embedded with the e-learning contexts. This raises questions about the practicality of offering e-learning in the Maldivian context. This paper describes Maldivian teacher educators' views on challenges associated with offering of online teacher education programmes.

The problem being addressed

The term e-learning and online learning are used interchangeably due to the similarity between the two ways of communication (Bates, 2005). E-learning has been around higher education sector over two decades. Primarily, it was introduced by Etienne Wenger in the 1990s. According to Wenger, it is a community of practice, characterized by shared interests and intended for supporting learning (Wenger, 2000). E-learning mainly takes the form of online courses, ranging from using a variety of learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle, WebCT, Blackboard, and Desire2Learn. Generally, the e-learning programmes are offered through specific course, divided into modules and lessons, supported with quizzes, tests and discussions (Downes, 2005). Clark and Mayer (2011) identified four promises in e-learning context: It 1) allows to customise learners' needs, 2) puts great emphasis on learner's engagement, 3) uses a range of multimedia tools including text, audio, and motion visuals to communicate with the learner, and 4) offers opportunities for the learner to immerse themselves in the learning process while bringing their own problems and situations to the

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learning scenarios. They however comment that often these promises fail to support the learning due to the complications encompassed in the learning context itself. This brings our attention to how these e-learning programmes could be effectively functioned in specific cultures. More specifically, how an e-learning setting could be contextualised considering the cultural aspects and the geographical nature of specific contexts.

In a Malaysian context, Mohammad, Mamat, and Isa (2012) reveal that several factors such as student support, flexibility, learning activities, and localisation of course-content are highly crucial when designing online learning for developing countries context. In an analysis of technology-related pedagogies in Asian countries, Tsai and Hwang (2013) recommended to re-examine the pedagogical theories, consider regional factors, and seek for area-representative educational applications such as language. They further emphasised on the importance of understanding the specific cultural impact when implementing technology-related pedagogies. As this area has not been investigated in the Maldives *per se*, these researchers suggest exploring the challenges, in order to address the contextual factors when designing e-learning programmes in the Maldives. This study seeks to answer the following question. What are the challenges that are associated with offering of online teacher education programmes in the Maldives?

Study design

The study adopted an ethnographic methodology approach focusing on understanding the influence of the specific Maldivian culture and the institutional context on their formed views on e-learning. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) define ethnographers are researchers who "go inside" stories through the 'hanging out' approach in order to provide "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10) about individuals' social context. Berg and Lune (2012) suggest that the qualitative descriptions of how things are happening in the context can be understood when researchers immerse themselves in the context.

The study gathered data through interviews, focus groups and hanging out with eleven teacher educators in a university, located in the Maldives. The essence of my understanding centred on exploring both the pedagogical context (what influences their views on e-learning) and technological context (what influences their formed views on challenges) in order to generate a holistic understanding about my participants' lived experiences (Serrant-Green, 2007) in their workplace context. The main themes for reporting the findings were generated through various strategies adhering to grounded theory, linking it with Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of capital (cultural, social, economic), as discussed further.

Findings

The findings of this study identified three themes related to challenges associated with offering of online teacher education programmes in the Maldives, as illustrated in Table 1.

Themes	Summary of findings
Geographical challenges	- Teachers who live in the islands face great difficulties moving to the capital city (Male') or to the big cities for upgrading their qualifications. Study leave is only given for one year. Study loan is not enough for covering the cost of the living in these cities.
	- Most teacher education institutions are located in the capital city or other campuses in a limited number of cities.
Infrastructural challenges	- Island communities have limited infrastructure for using the Internet for their everyday uses.

Cultural-challenges	- Teacher educators' limited uses of the available infrastructure due to many technical problems associated with their use of computers and the Internet. - The general perceptions about the learning and teaching among Maldivians. The subthemes generated were that teaching is content oriented, students' over dependency on teachers, teacher educators and students' familiarity with the uses of digital technologies for learning and teaching purposes. - Language barriers, the Maldivian language (*Dhivehi*) has limited uses in Microsoft office applications only.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the study identified three types of challenges to online teacher education programmes that were associated with the geographic nature of the Maldives and its culture. These challenges represent within the three-dimensional aspects (technology, pedagogy, culture), as synthesised via three forms of capital in Figure 2. The three forms of capital are interrelated with each other when understanding the challenges in the Maldives.

Economic capital for example depends on the wealth, the affordability and the quality of resources available (physical and virtual) (James, 2011). This includes what was available for teacher educators and how they use them, which also depends on how they understand these tools and resources within their professional lives. Bourdieu (2006) argues that economic capital is the "root of all other types of capital" (p. 288), which means that it provides immediate access to many resources through which individuals obtain both cultural and social capital in the context. This also means that their perceptions about online leaning and teaching perhaps may also have been influenced by the affordances in their past and present practices. Cuban et al. (2001) argue that unattended technical difficulties in the workplace lead to unsuccessful implementation of technologies in pedagogical practice and this idea links to Bourdieu's (1993) argument that individuals form dispositions within a field depending on their struggles and experiences. In the case of these teacher educators, since they experienced various technical difficulties when experimenting with tools such as Moodle, GEM or Self-service, they avoided using them if they could, instead opting for easy-to-use facilities that fitted with the content orientation of their teaching. The economic capital in this regard represents both geographical and infrastructural challenges to offering of online teacher education programmes in the Maldives.
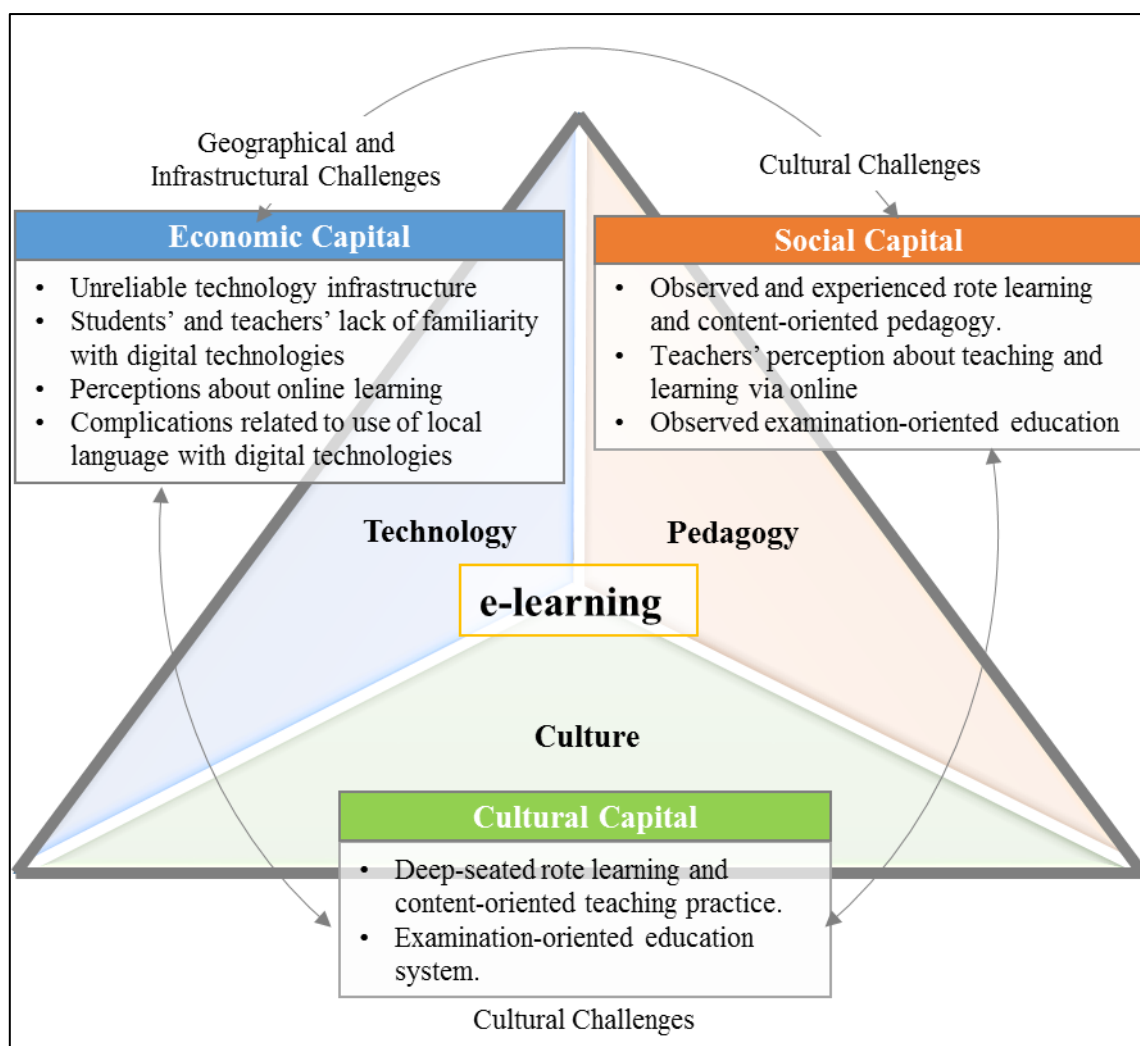
Figure 2. Understanding the challenges to e-learning possibilities in the Maldives, via three forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social)

Teacher educators' early learning experiences (social and cultural capital) have influenced their views of pedagogical practices as well as how they used digital technologies; for example, number of teacher educators repeatedly explained their classroom experiences were rote learning and content-oriented. This confirms the reasons behind their views about online learning or distanced learning being not appropriate for their students. The literature suggests that individuals' early learning and thinking forms certain beliefs about pedagogy, hence their understanding and conceptualisation of pedagogical practices (Dixon & Senior, 2011; Kisiel, 2013; Randi & Corno, 2007). The findings demonstrated that teacher educators' understanding of pedagogy and their views about online learning was influenced by their context of practice in the Maldives. Some of these influences were associated by the nature of students they teach, the nature of the examination-oriented system where they work, and the nature of content-heavy modules they teach. The context of practice plays a vital role in the forming of certain routines and pedagogical practices among teacher educators. Barton and Berchini (2013) confirm that a context is a place where teachers often shape their views and practices depending on its history, culture, geography and politics. This means that when teaching is done in specific contexts, the nature of students, the history of the context, and religious values could be considered as part of their pedagogical practice. This understanding aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) argument regarding the influence of social and cultural capital on people's

views, perceptions and practice. This therefore, represents a cultural challenge to offering of online learning teacher education programmes in the Maldives.

In short, it is crucial to consider the three types of challenges identified above, when designing e-learning programmes in the Maldives. While examining these challenges through the forms of capital provides practical implications of Bourdieu's theorisation for e-learning contexts.

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