

# Evaluating the Online Learning Experiences of Participants in an Online Education Course

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## Abstract

Learning online could be an entirely new experience for students who are used to learning in face-to-face contact settings. Of importance are the ways course instructors and learners transition to online teaching and learning. Underpinned by the Community of Inquiry framework, the study sought to explore and understand the online learning experiences of participants on a 4-week long intensive training programme in a rural-based university in Eswatini. A purposive sample of eleven participants participated in the study by completing a programme evaluation form and participating in a virtual focus group discussion session. The thematic content analysis method was utilised to analyse qualitative data. The study found that while the participants found online learning exciting and flexible, they had different interpretations of their interactions with content, peers, course instructors and technology. The study concludes that effective online teaching and learning is dependent on the meaningful interaction of the learners with content, peers, course instructors and technology. There are important pedagogical implications on how online course instructors should establish and maintain the three 'presences' which are the cognitive, the social and the teaching in ways that impact positively on the online learners' learning processes.

**Keywords:** Online learning, Interaction, Presence, Online pedagogy

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## 1. Introduction

Learning online could be an entirely new experience for some learners. It is always important to provide online learners opportunities to reflect on their online learning experiences, with a view to establish the strengths and weaknesses of online learning. It is important for course lecturers in higher education to undergo continuous professional development in order to enhance their pedagogical and curriculum development skills. This is meant to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

Continuous professional development is vital in improving students' learning experiences by perfecting the course lecturers' competencies (Tlali, 2018). Guskey (2002: 381) cited in Dilshad, Hussain and Batool (2019) explains that "high-quality professional development is a central component in nearly every modern proposal for improving education". Of importance in the foregoing observation is the fact that as the socio-economic environment changes, there will be pedagogical shifts and there is a need for course instructors in higher education to be equipped with new skills. The new skills will allow the course instructors to deal with the new environments, without lagging behind.

## 2. What is online learning?

Online learning is a term that was first used in 1995 when the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) was developed. Back then, online learning was about using the LMS or uploading text and PDFs online (Bates, 2020). Ever since, online learning has been referred to in other terms such as e-learning, blended learning, online education or online courses. Other authors described it in various ways yet it can be simply defined as, education that takes place over the Internet. Other scholars refer to online learning as a learning environment that uses the Internet (Usher & Barak, 2020; Huang, 2019).

Nowadays most ODL institutions adopt learning management systems such as Moodle to centralise contents, learning and assessment activities in a specific learning environment. It is used to plan, implement, and evaluate a specific learning process (Bradley, 2021). LMS makes the interaction between learner-instructor and learner-learner more convenient. However, Instructors have been found to use only the productivity feature such as uploading and sharing notes or handouts while ignoring other features such as grades or assignment feedback (Galanek, Gierdowski & Brooks, 2018). Subsequently, the LMS features most commonly used are those that facilitate the fixed transfer of information, whether via grades or course documents (Brooks & Pomerantz, 2017).

## 3. Theoretical Framework

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework represents a process of creating a deep and meaningful learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements: social, cognitive and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). As stated by Mthethwa-Kunene, Rugube, and Maphosa (2020), the community of inquiry has become one of the more prevalent models for online and blended courses that are

intended to be highly interactive among learners and faculty using discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and videoconferencing.

Learning occurs for a group of individual learners through the educational experience that occurs when the social, cognitive and teaching presences are brought together. Past research reveals that it is through the skilful marshalling of these forms of presence that online academic staff and students, in collaboration, develop a productive online learning environment through which knowledge is constructed (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Suriyakumari, 2016).

The integration of technology into courses varies from making use of specific applications to making use of digital spaces for supplementing course materials, and to offering fully online courses via LMS (Wright, Marsh & Miller, 1999). To illustrate how technology could facilitate elements of the CoI framework for an online course where Moodle is the delivery platform. Participants are tasked to introduce themselves and upload their images using a forum which could be viewed by facilitators and the participants.

#### Online learning support from course instructors

The success of any programme regardless of the mode of delivery depends on the kind of support given to the students by their course instructors, student counsellors and peer interaction among others. Course instructors have a critical role to play in supporting students for success in an online environment. Aitken and Hayes (2021) observed that the creativity of the educators is central to the success of students in an online programme as they have to devise innovative strategies to meet the varied students' needs. They argue that course instructors need a diverse set of skills to adjust from traditional academic roles and catch up with the innovations in the online space. A review of literature has shown that the course instructor's role in an online setting is multidimensional; there is the social presence, cognitive presence and the teaching presence which all are equally important to offer the support needed by the student to successfully navigate the online environment (Fawns, Jones & Aitken, 2019).

The needs of the students should be placed at the centre in any learning environment and it is even more prudent to do so in an online environment to reduce the pressure on the students and increase their chances of success. Walsh, Mital, Ratclif, Yap, and Jamaledine (2020) hold that learning analytics has proven to provide highly responsive student support for online learning. The student's personal data obtained is useful in giving the teacher a clearer picture of the kind of students they will be dealing with and design to meet their needs. This brings satisfaction to the students and increases their retention rate. On the same note, Kelly, Johnston, and Matthews (2020) emphasise the value of flexibility and personalised support to meet the varied students' needs in an online space. The support could be in the form of allowing peer interaction and directing students to specific personnel to assist with library search, and technical support.

#### 4. Support from fellow online learners

As noted by McLoughlin and Alam (2014), students valued peer collaboration in online learning. They report having greater benefits of online interaction on other social network platforms such as Twitter. These social media forums create a culture of engagement and peer interaction. This then cascades to online learning where students need to encourage one another and develop deeper networks to tackle learning tasks together and successfully complete a programme. The value of peer interaction for academic success was also reported by Boyle, Kwon, Ross, and Simpson (2010) who observed that open interaction among students allowed them to share workloads and personal problems. This eased the pressure on them as they motivated one another to achieve a common goal.

Mentoring and peer support is the most common kind of support fellow online learners could offer to their peers. Kumar and Coe (2017) observed that mentoring and peer support helped students adapt better to an online learning environment and improved their communication skills with fellow students. Researchers in online teaching and learning agree that strong networks among students studying in a self-paced environment like the online were critical for their success. During orientation to an online programme, the mentors were have been through the system are able to help new students develop realistic expectations and clarified some important requirements for success in an online programme (Brindley, 2014; Horvath, Stirling, Bevacqua, Coldrey, Buultjens & Larsen, 2019). Strong peer collaboration created a sense of belonging among the students and this kept them motivated to complete their course as they received socio-emotional support from their peers (Brindley, 2014). Kumar and Johnson (2017) also observed the value of mentoring and peer support. They hold that mentors helped to scaffold new students in an online learning environment and made them develop confidence as they did not feel isolated.

Fostering a sense of community among students studying online has shown to have a positive impact on students' retention rate and increased success in their programmes. Kumar and Coe (2017) argue for the "social nature of learning" to increase students' success online. In their view, allowing students to socialise with one another and support their peers work on challenging tasks in groups is important to keep them focused as they learnt from their peers.

#### 4.1 Research Objectives

The study sought to answer the following research objectives;

- i) To ascertain the way course participants interacted with other participants in online learning
- ii) To establish the nature of support provided by the course instructors in online learning

#### 4.2 Research methodology

In this section, the research methodology is discussed by addressing the research paradigm, research approach, research design, selection of the research participants, data collection instruments, data analysis, data trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The study was located in the interpretivist research paradigm. In the context of the present study, the researchers sought to explore an in-depth understanding of the participants of an online course by making sense of their subjective experiences. The study followed a qualitative research approach. In the present study, the researchers engaged the course participants in order to establish their online learning experiences. A case study design was utilised in the study. As noted by Rashid et al. (2019) a case study design allows a researcher to undertake an investigation of an issue within a particular context. In the present study, a specific case of course instructors who participated in an online education professional development course was pursued.

The purposive sampling technique was utilised to select the participants for the study. The participants selected for the present study were all the eleven participants of an online education course. The participants were deemed information-rich owing to their experience in the online course hence they could provide useful insights. In collecting data for the study, the researchers utilised two main data collection instruments namely an open-ended questionnaire and a focus group discussion. Both data collection instruments were administered at the end of the online education course. The focus group discussion was conducted virtually as participants were engaged in a debriefing virtual session where they responded to questions about their online learning experiences.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis

The thematic content analysis was utilised to analyse the qualitative data collected using the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview schedule. The researchers utilised the thematic content analysis to deconstruct the participants' narratives regarding their online learning experiences. The participants' narratives from the questionnaire were also used to support themes and sub-themes generated from the analysis of the interview data.

### 5. Results

In this section, the results of the study are presented according to the objectives of the study starting with a description of the research participants' profiles.

#### Profile of research participants

In describing the participants, the researchers focused on three considerations; gender, position, and highest qualification as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Description of the research participants

Participant Code	Gender	Position	Highest Qualification
Participant A	Female	University Lecturer	Master's degree
Participant B	Male	College Lecturer	Master's degree
Participant C	Female	High school Teacher	Bachelor's degree
Participant D	Male	College Lecturer	Master's degree
Participant E	Female	High School Teacher	Bachelor's degree
Participant F	Female	College Lecturer	Master's degree
Participant G	Female	College Lecturer	Master's degree
Participant H	Female	High School Teacher	Bachelor's degree
Participant I	Male	University Lecturer	Doctoral degree
Participant J	Male	University Lecturer	Doctoral degree
Participant K	Female	University Lecturer	Master's degree

There were eleven participants; male and female. The participants were all involved in teaching, either at high school or tertiary. All the participants were highly qualified professionals holding a minimum of a

Bachelor's degree and there were also a couple of PhD holders.

## 6. Results on participants' experiences in online learning experiences in an online education course

In line with the thematic content analysis strategy utilised in analysing data, the results are presented thematically with the themes and sub-themes concerning course participants' online learning experiences are captured in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes concerning course participants' online learning experiences

Focal research objective	Themes	Issues raised
To ascertain the way course participants interacted with other participants in online learning	Exchange of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· easy exchange of information online</li> <li>· comparing one's sources of information with others</li> </ul>
	Sharing of resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· ability to send educational resources to others</li> <li>· receiving resources from others</li> </ul>
	Participation in social networking group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· sending messages to other participants</li> <li>· receiving messages from others</li> </ul>
	Participation in virtual group chat forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· learning from other participants' posts</li> <li>· commenting on other participants posts</li> </ul>
To establish the nature and extent of support provided by the course instructors in online learning	Clarifying task requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· opportunities to seek clarity on task requirements</li> </ul>
	Checking on progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· course instructors checking on progress</li> <li>· course instructors assisting with challenges</li> </ul>
	Regular announcements and updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· updates given regularly</li> <li>· important announcements provided</li> </ul>
	Constant availability for online support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· getting support whenever required</li> <li>· feeling supported all the time</li> </ul>
	Feedback on tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· regular feedback provided</li> <li>· immediate feedback provided</li> <li>· detailed feedback provided</li> </ul>

### *The way course participants interacted with other participants in online learning*

The participants' views on how they experienced interaction in online learning included an exchange of information, sharing of resources, participation in social networking groups as well as participation in virtual group chat forums.

#### 6.1 Exchange of information

The participants indicated that they interacted with other participants online by exchanging information. The virtual learning platform made it easy for them to send and receive information as indicated by some of the participants in the following excerpts;

*I found it very easy to send information to my colleagues as we could work on one document on Google Drive or on Jamboard. (Participant C)*

*Discussion forums also assisted me to learn from my peers and I could get new points of view from others. (Participant K)*

*Some information was shared through the WhatsApp group and I could access it easily. (Participant D)*

The excerpts above indicated clearly that the interaction of the course participants online was marked by an exchange of information through the different online technologies. It was clear from the views shared that the availability of technologies including features of the Learning Management System made interaction easy as the participants could conveniently share information in different ways.

### 6.2 Sharing of resources

The participants also revealed that their interaction with other learners in the online course resulted in sharing learning resources online. The experience of sharing of learning resources online was evident in the following verbatim quotations by some of the participants;

*Some of the students shared links to some useful videos and we all benefitted.* (Participant H).

*Whenever I found useful journal articles on the Internet, I would send the articles to my group members to read.* (Participant K)

*Our course instructors created a resource repository on the Moodle LMS in one of the courses and we were able to access some useful material by simply downloading them.* (Participant C)

It was clear from the above excerpts that the participants in the online course were able to access and share learning materials through their interaction with other participants online. The sharing of resources is evidence of meaningful interaction and enhances online learning experiences.

### 6.3 Participation in social networking group

The participants of the online course also reported that they experienced participation in social networking groups through sending messages to other participants and receiving messages from others. This happened mainly through a WhatsApp group. Some excerpts below confirm the participants' views;

*In each module, the course instructors created a WhatsApp group and this group made communication and interaction possible.* (Participant B)

*The course instructors always posted timely reminders about submissions and meetings and we were kept informed.* (Participant K)

*We were able to share information among ourselves as students and we were also able to ask questions to our facilitators.* (Participant F)

*The use of WhatsApp messages is generally cheap, easy and convenient to everyone. One receives communication in real-time and this was good for our progress in learning.* (Participant G)

The participants' participation in a social networking group was highlighted as important in the online learning process through timeous communication and effective interaction.

### 6.4 Participation in a virtual group chat and discussion forums

The participants also indicated that they benefitted from their involvement in discussion and chat forums provided in the different modules. Some of the views were evident in the following verbatim quotations from some of the participants;

*I learnt a lot from my colleagues' posts as some of the posts brought up new ideas and views on a given topic.* (Participant C)

*Some of my colleagues responded to the questions and comments that I made on their posts and that made learning very interactive and exciting.* (Participant D)

*My instructors asked thought-provoking questions about my posts and I was forced to research before responding.* (Participant I)

*The instructors always acknowledged our posts and the comments and questions allowed us to think.* (Participant A)

The participants' participation in chat and discussion forums online was revealed as a vital aspect of interaction in online learning as the participants were afforded with opportunities to engage in mutually rewarding academic exchanges. Discussion and chat forums were, therefore, powerful online learning tools.

### 6.5 The nature and extent of support provided by the course instructors in online learning

In establishing the online learning experiences of the participants, the researchers also interrogated the nature and extent of support provided to the participants by the course instructors.

### 6.6 Clarifying task requirements

The participants revealed that the course instructors were available to clarify task requirements. Such availability made it easy for them to progress with and successfully complete the given tasks. The excerpts below confirmed the participants' views;

*The online course also afforded participants opportunities to seek clarity on task requirements.* (Participant A)

*As students were able to seek clarity through different platforms including Moodle, the main learning platform, WhatsApp and emails.* (Participant J)

*The course instructors and e-tutors provided clarification on the different tasks and activities wherever required.* (Participant D)

*We were even free to contact the facilitators directly by phone, SMS, email or WhatsApp to seek and receive assistance.* (Participant F)

The revelation in the study that the participants were afforded the opportunity to seek and receive clarification on different tasks and activities showed that there was significant support provided to the online learners. Effective online learning is possible where adequate support is provided.

#### 6.8 Availability for online support

The participants indicated that they were receiving support since the course instructors and e-tutors were always and readily available online to offer the required support. The participants reported the following in support of the view;

*Student-teacher and student-student interactions were good and made one not feel isolated. The use of different learning online environments was good to be exposed to. (Participant B)*

*The course instructors and e-tutors were assisting us online all the time and we never felt left alone. (Participant I)*

*It was always motivating to get the necessary support as and when I required it. (Participant E)*

The availability of the course instructors online to support the online learners was confirmed by the participants. Such availability was deemed an important aspect of online support necessary for the enhancement of online learning experiences.

#### 6.9 Feedback on tasks

On the issue of feedback, the participants reported that regular feedback was provided; the feedback was immediate and detailed. The promptness of feedback served as a motivation for the participants to progress well with their studies. The views on feedback were evident in the following verbatim quotations from the participants;

*For some instructors, I liked the promptness in feedback; it gave one a motivation to move on. (Participant B)*

*It never took long to receive feedback on the tasks submitted for assessment and this helped me to take note of my strengths and weaknesses. (Participant J)*

*I was able to read and understand the comments provided on my work. (Participant H)*

*The course instructors provided detailed comments on positive and negative aspects of the work assessed and I could tell how some of the marks awarded were arrived at. (Participant E)*

The participants felt supported in their online learning as they experienced the provision of timeous and detailed feedback. The feedback provided was important in shaping and directing the online learning processes.

#### 6.10 Regular announcements and updates

The participants also revealed that, in terms of support, they received regular announcements and updates from the course instructors. This view was supported by the following excerpts;

*We had regular updates through the WhatsApp group and these kept us informed. (Participant A)*

*The instructors updated us every morning on the activities for the day and this was done on the Moodle Announcements section and in the WhatsApp group. (Participant H)*

*Individuals with concerns were also invited for a one-on-one consultation with the facilitators or tutors. (Participant J)*

*Reminders were often sent out on outstanding activities and tasks as well as dates for submission and meetings. (Participant C)*

The above excerpts confirm that the participants in the online course felt supported through the issues of regular updates and reminders on the different aspects of the course.

### 7. Discussion

The findings of the study showed that participants appreciated the kind of interaction that occurred among other participants in online learning. Their interaction included exchanging information, sharing resources, and sending and receiving messages from one another. This shows that interaction among participants is important for the success of students in an online course. This was corroborated by Kumar and Coe (2017) and McLoughlin and Alam (2014) who observed that mentoring and peer support helped students adapt better to an online learning environment and improved their communication skills with fellow students. In essence, fostering a sense of community among students studying online has a positive impact on students' retention rate and increased success as they valued peer collaboration in an online space. This finding also fits well with the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework that emphasises the process of creating a deep and meaningful (collaborative-constructivist) learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements: social, cognitive and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001).

The study also showed there is value in the support offered by course instructors offered to students in an online course. The support that students received included timely and elaborate feedback that specified how students fared in an activity. This helps them to identify areas of improvement and ways of getting help on more

challenging tasks. Walsh, Mital, Ratclif, Yap, and Jamaledine, (2020) support this view in that learning analytics has proven to provide highly responsive student support for online learning. The study further showed that it is important for course instructors to be present to constantly offer support, check progress and further attend to the individual needs of students in an online course. This idea is in sync with Aitken and Hayes (2021) who assert that the creativity of the educators is central to the success of students in an online programme as they have to devise innovative strategies to meet the varied students' needs.

It was established from the study that the online learners participated in social networking platforms and the participants enhanced their learning experiences. This finding is consistent with McLoughlin and Alam (2014)'s report that students benefitted from online interaction on social networking platforms such as Twitter which created a culture of engagement and peer interaction enabling students to tackle learning tasks together and successfully complete a programme. In this study, students used WhatsApp as the main social networking platform. They explained that this social media network platform allowed course instructors to create WhatsApp groups and this enabled communication and interaction between students and instructors as well as among students. They received timeous communication in the form of reminders about submissions and meetings, and effective interactions as they shared information among themselves. According to them, this enhanced their learning. The students preferred this platform because they found it to be generally cheap, easy, convenient, and efficient to use. The findings are supported by Faizi and El Fkihi (2018) who asserted that the use of social networks as educational platforms has several potential advantages such as that they have strong potential to enhance communication and interaction among students and between faculty members and students as well as being capable of increasing students' engagement in the learning process.

This study also found that the online learners' experiences were supported due to the availability of the course instructors online to offer such support. Literature has backed up the concept of instructors providing support to online learners. In online instruction and learning, it is expected that instructors will have to offer efficient learner support (Li, Gillies, He, Wu, Liu, Gong, & Sun, 2021). Additionally, teachers must offer sufficient technological support. It shouldn't be expected that all learners are familiar with using the required technologies or online learning. In particular, online instructors have a technical role in ensuring that learners feel at ease using the online platform and directing them to the appropriate technical assistance resources (Flanigan, Akcaoglu, & Ray, 2022). Learner achievement is a result of learner support.

The issue of regular and timeous announcements provided by the course instructors was found vital in enhancing the learners' online learning experiences. This view is corroborated by Fawns, Aitken and Jones, (2021) who hold that the space in which the teaching and learning occurs has a bearing on the way in which communication between the teacher and the students will unfold. This also influences the kind of learning and thinking practices. That being the case, a strong level of trust among all involved is paramount to ensure that they are comfortable interacting with one another without reservations and get desired support. The teacher, therefore, has to create a safe space for all learners to perform to their optimum level. In the same vein, Aitken and Hayes (2021) observed that the creativity of educators is central to the success of students in an online programme as they have to devise innovative strategies to meet the varied students' needs. So the regular and timeous announcements provided by the course instructors created a conducive online learning space and students did not miss important announcements. Kohnke and Moorhouse (2022) also share the view that student support online can be enhanced through the use of synchronous meeting tools such as Zoom.

## 8. Conclusions

The study concludes that learning online provides learners with ample opportunities to communicate using the available technologies. Through the communication avenues, the learners are able to exchange knowledge, share resources and participate in social networking groups. As the learners participated in online learners, they interacted with the course instructors and received academic and technical support in the different areas of their learning online. The learners learning online also experienced numerous challenges yet there were also opportunities for enhancing the online learning experiences.

## 9. Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made;

- a) Online courses should be designed in such a way that they promote high levels of interactivity. Students should be provided with opportunities to interact with the course content, course instructors and fellow students.
- b) The way students interact with fellow students in an online learning environment should promote collaborative and cooperative learning, which is self-directed and student-centred.
- c) Online courses should be marked by high forms of instructor presence in the virtual learning space as this assists in providing the much-needed support and guidance.

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