

LEARNING FROM FIRST TIME ELEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN THE MALDIVES: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In Maldives, educational policy makers are beginning to explore the value of ICT and web tools as a medium of continuous professional development for school leaders and teachers. This paper reports on insights and responses of a group of five school leaders who participated in a web based distance education course. For most of them, this was their first experience in distance education as well as eLearning within a formal University context. By giving voice to the participants, we explore and identify strategies for successful first time eLearning experiences for school leaders. These include student preparedness for academic studies as well as for eLearning, language proficiency, cultural and social dynamics of knowledge construction as well as personal attributes which lead to successful learning.

Keywords: First time eLearning experiences; professional development of school leaders

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore pedagogic, technological and social factors which support/hinder e-learning as a strategy for continuous professional development of school leaders in the Maldives. This is achieved through exploration of the outcomes of course design, content delivery and interactional strategies on completion rates of an eLearning course delivered to Maldivian school leaders who were first time eLearners in a formal learning context.

Maldives have 200 inhabited islands spread across an island archipelago of 1200 extremely small islands in 20 atolls, spanning 900,000 sq km of Ocean. This makes provision of continuous professional development using face to face training time consuming and expensive. Furthermore, human resource is limited by the size of the nation's small population of approximately 300,000, as well as lack of employment avenues in the islands. However, it has 103 mobile phones to every 100 inhabitants and nearly 30% of the population uses the internet (Ibrahim and Ahmad, 2008).

Maldives government, while is struggling with establishing the required IT infrastructure nationwide, is beginning to explore online learning as a possible alternative to the costly and difficult task of providing face to face training for continuous professional development in all sectors across the nation. While the nation has a high literacy rate and has achieved nearly universalised primary education, there is an acute shortage of people whose educational attainment is above the basic levels of literacy and numeracy.

Medium of instruction in schools is English due to popular demand by parents to ensure that their children have equal opportunities for further study and for employment. Inadequate instruction in English language as well as lack of exposure to English language media in daily life are hindrances to children succeeding in schooling with English language as the main language of instruction. In addition to this, international research clearly identifies deeper socio-cultural and economic reasons that stretch far beyond teacher training and exposure to language which leads to failure in achieving successful learning and motivation to learn by children who are expected to follow a curriculum designed and delivered using a foreign or second language (Mohan, Leung & Davison, 2001; Gibbons, 2002; Macedo, Dendrinis & Gounari, 2003; Gee, 2004, among others). This makes complex the provision of continuous professional development for Maldivian school leaders.

Any online course for Maldivian school leaders needs to cater for cultural expectations of learners in addition to the provision of a unique kind of adult online education where learners have high levels of practical expertise and experience but lack the academic qualifications and skills required for participation in internationally provided online courses.

Approximately 66% of Maldivian teachers have ten years of basic education. Only forty percent of local teachers have had any teacher training. Schools in rural, hard to reach places have higher numbers of less well trained teachers. In many instances, level of subject knowledge of primary teachers is below the level of the students whom they teach. International research literature clearly demonstrates the importance of professional development for successful school development, teacher growth and successful learning for children (Hargreaves, 2003; Day, 1999, Mujis et al, 2004, Hirsch, 2005). The low retention rate and extreme turnover of both trained and untrained teachers in the Maldives means that providing expensive face to face training is not sustainable.

Research shows that giving teachers an opportunity to access new ideas, collaborate, experiment and to share best practice of teaching and learning will lead to greater potential for school improvement and enhance classroom learning as well as wellbeing of teachers (Muijs and Reynolds, 2000; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001). Access to Virtual Learning Environments may be one way of opening doors to learning and collaboration, for teachers working within such remote isolated communities. In order to establish online learning communities for teachers and children of Maldives, it is crucial for school leaders to become learners and to be familiar with online learning to support teachers and to create online learning environments.

In extremely small and remote communities, school heads cannot rely only on externally led initiatives which may not be properly contextualised, to provide the expertise required to bring about change (Datnow et al., 2002, Harris and Chapman, 2004). Maldivian School leaders work within a unique socio-cultural and economic context and in extreme geographical isolation. Only through collaborative dialogue and learning from each other within trustful relationships can Maldivian school leaders develop the required expertise to become autonomous and effective leaders.

The limited human and financial resources make online education a very attractive option for continuous professional development of school leaders, even though many are under trained for the high expectations set for themselves as learners and as agents of change.

This paper outlines the learning experiences of five school leaders who were among the first Maldivian educators to experience eLearning for continuous professional development. By exploring the learning experiences of these five educators in detail, we identify potential strategies to enhance course design and content delivery to improve success rates of eLearning and online education for professional development of Maldivian school leaders as well as first time eLearners within a professional learning context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we outline the philosophical and theoretical foundations on which this study is based. The underlining theories used were constructivism and andragogy. Constructivism is a learning theory which states that meaningful learning occurs when the learner makes sense of new learning by linking what is new to what the learner already knows (Bruner, 1965; Piaget, 1973; von Glaserfeld, 1995). The learner selects, organises and integrates what is relevant and meaningful in the new learning to restructure and reorganise and if needed, modify what is already known. Construction of new organisational structures is best achieved when students are guided in specific directions rather than when left alone to discover new things (Mayer 2004). Constructivism has two branches known as personal or cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. The importance of the socio-cultural environment in which learning takes place, as well as the significance of collaborative interactions in learning, was highlighted by Vygotsky (1978) and is known as social constructivism (Cobb, 1994). This learning can be facilitated and enhanced by situated cognition whereby meaningful experiences and challenging encounters are provided. Such learning avenues can be provided through webquests and other problem solving scenarios which are meaningful and relevant to the learner's lived experiences (Visser et al, 2005). While most of the constructivist theory is based on work by Bruner (1965), Piaget (1973) and Vygotsky (1978) which focussed on young children's learning; Kolb (1984) extended constructivist theory to adult learners in his experiential learning theory. Kolb posits that learning is a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and applying the learning to related experiences in the learner's environment. While Kolb's experiential learning cycle is criticised in that learners may use all the processes at once or skip some of the stages to achieve the required outcome (Forrest, 2004), all four stages are considered useful for planning for transitions in mode of instruction to enable for independent learning as learners move to higher levels of learning (Hutchins, 2003).

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) coalesce most of what is in constructivist theory to Seven Principles of Good Practice in course design and delivery in higher education which was applied to online learning in Chickering and Ehrmann (1996). These principles are;

- student-faculty contact,
- cooperation among students,
- active learning,
- prompt feedback,
- time on task,
- high expectations, and
- respect for diverse talents and ways of learning.

Knowles (1984)'s rubric of adult learners more commonly known as andragogy states that humans learn throughout their life span. While andragogy is criticised as not a theory of learning or teaching, the following typology offered by Knowles (1984) makes a strong argument for distance and online education within adult education contexts (Merriam and Cafarella, 1999). The typology states that adults learn,

- when they are internally motivated about learning new things;
- adults can be taught to do self-directed learning;
- adults' greater reservoir of experience can be used as a learning tool;
- adults' readiness to learn is based on actual social roles; and
- adults need to apply new knowledge and skills almost immediately

Level of student participation in the learning process is a predictor of the level of successful achievement of learning (Tinto, 1997). Traditional students arrive at college with a certain background which can lead to different levels of participation, such as family background, socio-economic status, prior academic preparation, skills, abilities as well as commitment to learn (Tinto, 1975). This commitment may become stronger or weaker depending on the level of socio and academic integration the student acquires during the program of learning. He argues for the importance of creation of a successful learning community, since failure to achieve a sense of belonging to a learning community can lead to loss of commitment. Tinto's work is based on Durkheim (1957)'s notion that membership within a community can be both social and intellectual. While Tinto's work was based on traditional classrooms where faculty and students interact face to face, Moore (1989) extended student participation within distance education. He identified three kinds of interaction; peer interaction, student-content and student to instructor interaction. While all three have significant impact on learning; in courses designed with eLearning components, levels of learner competence and engagement with learner interface interaction can lead to different levels of interaction and hence, learning (Hillman, Willis and Gunewardana, 1994).

Newlands and Coldwell (2004) identified four barriers to online learning: responsibility for learning, interaction, use of appropriate learning strategies and acquisition of required ancillary skills. As with all other human endeavours, interaction with ICT, and interaction with learning contexts and learning communities is deeply influenced by culture and the community in which learning takes place (Ess, 2009). Hence, this study examines the learning experiences of five adult online learners from a socio-cultural perspective. An important implication of using a socio-cultural approach is to acknowledge that knowledge construction is a dynamic process resulting from engaging with content which is meaningful and relevant to the learner as well as from interactions with other learners and the community in which the learner lives and works.

A methodological implication is for the researcher to study what the perspective and practice of the learners are through conversation and listening. Hence, we asked the participants what aspects of the course worked for them, what aspects didn't work for them and if they were to design and deliver a course how would they do it differently. Through listening to these experienced educators, we identified what was considered as significant learning experiences and what enables them to learn as first time eLearners in a continuous professional development context.

THE STUDY CONTEXT

This case study is based on the eLearning experience of Maldivian school leaders who participated in a blended Postgraduate Certificate course designed for professional development of sixty school leaders in the Maldives from 2008 to 2009.

While most of the teaching was online, using a web based learning platform; students had one opportunity for face to face interaction with some of the instructors at the beginning of the course and two more opportunities to meet their peers informally face to face at the end of the first and second semesters when they had to come to the capital city to sit for examinations as was stipulated by Maldives Accreditation Board requirements for Certification.

Initially, the course was planned to be delivered to sixty school heads. Since it was impossible to identify sixty school heads who were keen to participate in an eLearning course, the sixty participants were selected from school leaders at different levels of leadership and included school supervisors, teacher educators, grade coordinators and teachers who voluntarily applied to participate in the course. An equal number of male and female participants were selected. Twenty eight of the sixty participants completed the course of which eighteen were female. The course was offered through Minho University of Portugal with UNICEF Funding.

The sixty course participants were selected on the basis of their oral language proficiency in English. Academic qualifications varied although none had an undergraduate degree. Even though some of the applicants spoken English was barely adequate, chances to participate in the course were given to ensure equal distribution of opportunity to participate in online continuous professional development, across the atolls. If academic qualifications and writing skills were taken into account, it might not have been possible to have enough applicants to have a custom designed program, based on the learners needs, implemented cost effectively. However, English language proficiency continued to be an issue through out the course duration as the findings section of this study illustrate.

In the selection of candidates for the course, the concept of establishing support networks and mini-learning communities was used. Thus, as much as possible, two people in school leadership positions were either selected from each school or from the same island and if this was not possible at least from within each atoll. Course content was selected based on a needs identification survey which was sent to the course participants before the course. The topics which were most popular from the survey were included in the course structure. Course designers gave different weight to the components identified in the needs survey, based on the time which was available and was perceived by the course designers as more significant aspects of teaching, learning and school leadership. Hence, course designers did exercise a degree of authority on course structure. There isn't much research on first time eLearners views of eLearning (Tyler-Smith 2006). Paying attention to what they have to say about the course design and instructional strategies could enable for higher rates in successful completion of courses by incoming cohorts of first time eLearners (McNair and Thompson, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

In this paper we explore the eLearning experience of five participants, two male and three female. The five participants were selected based on ease of access. The three female participants were a grade coordinating teacher, a school supervisor and a teacher educator respectively. The male participants were a secondary school deputy head and a primary school head. All three women worked within the same school while both men worked in two other schools. All lived and worked in the same island and knew each other professionally. The male secondary school deputy head, the male primary school head and the female grade coordinator had dropped out of the course early on. The teacher educator has completed the course while the school supervisor is continuing to complete the program late due to taking time away for care giving responsibilities.

The study was conducted from the perspective of how can we make online education more successful for continuous professional development of school leaders and teachers in the Maldives. A forty five minute face to face interview was conducted with four participants while a phone interview was conducted with the other participant. Follow up conversations were held by e-mail and phone for clarification of ideas. A general opening question of, "can you tell me about the eLearning course in which you participated" was asked which then lead to the other questions, based on the participant's response to the first question. The follow up questions were: what was successful in the course you had completed; and if not completed, why did you drop out; which aspects of the course design helped or hindered your learning; how did you organise the learning; and if given a chance to design a course, how would you do it differently.

The first author of this paper is Maldivian and has worked closely at policy level in online education in the Maldives, as well as in-service teacher education in the Maldives for the past 15 years. She has a strong ongoing professional relationship with the research participants. All interviews were conducted by her, using the mother tongue for conversation, dialogue and for the formal interview process. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the Maldivian author. While some Maldivian words and concepts do not translate fully into English, the translation was done keeping in mind to describe as much as possible a Maldivian way of thinking and communicating. The Maldivian author has done doctoral research on Maldivian ways of knowing. The other author of this paper is Portuguese and was a lead instructor in the course and taught one of the modules in the course described here. The interview data were analysed by reading through transcripts looking for comments on course design, content delivery and interaction. Since participant preparedness for eLearning and mentoring and support was mentioned as significant by all participants these were also included in the data analysis. The findings are reported in the next section. We have used direct quotes from the interviews extensively to allow for a richer interpretation of the learning experience of the participants. We have also used in the data analysis, our own knowledge and experience of the course as well as feedback given by students to us and to students by us during the course of the program of study, to provide a richer text.

FINDINGS

Participant Preparedness For Elearning

Though all five participants in this study used Microsoft Office tools for administrative work and had a positive attitude towards the use of ICT to support teaching and learning, they needed to be trained for the challenges of use of ICT for formal learning. In instances where they didn't know how to use ICT they spent more time figuring how to use ICT than on reflecting on their own learning, such as spending more time thinking about what software to use to design an e-portfolio, rather than on what evidence of learning should be included in the portfolio and what would be the best way to present the development and progress of the learning process.

While the findings show that all the ICT skills required for the course need to be taught early on and during face to face training, participants picked up skills for academic study and independent learning as they progressed, by seeking the support of instructors through online interaction.

Taking responsibility for own learning and being proactive in seeking the support of instructors and peers were crucial to the successful completion of the course, as well as been given time and support to complete the course.

Effective time management was highlighted by those who completed the course. Furthermore participating in this course was perceived by participants as giving them confidence and the required skills to continue to do further study using online education.

In this course there was an ICT module. It was good that it was taught in the face to face training. In that we were taught how to use the blackboard and we wrote in the discussion forum, participated in the chat sessions and developed blogs. Then later on when we had to use them practically it was easy. (FT 2009)

If it is an online course, students need to know ICT very well. I would say in this course in the face to face training we were taught the techniques very well. Blogs, Podcasts and how to upload was taught very well. In online education, If

I was designing a course, for each task I would give students chances to practice the skills (in the face to face training sessions)... When we started the course I didn't know how to do academic reading. As the course progressed I learned how to do it... In the references we were given, we weren't told how to do academic writing... the instructor sent us information on how to reference. In the forum we can put questions we want so through asking questions also I learned. If there was any doubt we can ask on the forum (FS 2009).

... it is important to assess before course starts which ICT skills we have and to see if we have all the skills required for the course as a checklist... When we started most of us didn't have much ICT skills but if we take an additional online course most of us will complete it successfully... Earlier I didn't really like to read text books and fell sleepy when I began to read but now I can read a chapter, underline with pencil and summarise and make notes myself. I thought this is a bigger success for me than the certificate (FTE 2009)

Taking an online course was described as the best preparation for continuing professional development through online courses. Both participants who had dropped out of the course were positive about continuing their studies online and one has already enrolled in a postgraduate Masters Level course delivered completely online.

Course Design

The course was designed based on a needs survey carried out at the beginning of the project. The selection of course content based on the needs of the participants meant that the content was useful for most of them.

The online course was significant in that this was one of the rare opportunities the teachers had to use the content they were learning for immediate use in their teaching practice.

They also were keen to make sure their level of performance was equivalent to the performance of other students taking similar level qualifications, despite the course been offered by a recognised European University. Some parts of the course were not given as much weight by the course designers as was preferred by the course participants.

I learned more than I expected from the course. Because of the way the course was designed through reading on my own initiative also I am learning new things. I now am confident and believe that I can work as an independent learner. I now have that confidence (FTE 2009).

Some courses were only for three weeks, which is too short. We couldn't learn to the level we wanted to learn. For example, topics like behaviour management and special needs education, these topics are areas where we need lot of information and are very important to us. But because these courses were short we didn't get enough knowledge in these topics. So, I prefer rather than short courses, at least courses of four weeks duration or two months durations. I prefer them to be eight weeks. In those courses we learned a lot of things (FTE 2009).

One of the assignments given in the course taught by the second author was an action research project which was based on the principles of active learning, respect for diverse talents and cooperation among students as aspects of successful learning. The action research projects were selected by participants on the basis of their interests. Having the opportunity to do relevant and meaningful research within the context in which the participants worked was valued. Having freedom in choice of issues to study makes the online learning more relevant and meaningful to students. However, since students only had access to the limited resources made available online, level of analysis and engagement was limited.

The materials given were very relevant. We had to read the materials and relate to Maldivian context... Sometimes we had to interview people as well. We used to discuss it among ourselves as well (FTE 2009)

In this course what benefitted me the most is in professional development. For example, in the supervision and monitoring unit I learned a lot of things I didn't know earlier. This is my third year in supervision. Earlier in classroom observation we observed all aspects and gave general feedback. Now, when we do clinical supervision, I know that for teacher's improvement, it is better to focus on one area to develop. So, that unit was especially useful to me. (FS2009).

Participants' Views of Access to Learning Resources

Course participants were initially sent course books at the start of the course. A set of readings was sent to each Teacher Resource Centre and students were expected to copy the materials. Some students had difficulty accessing these materials and wished they were each sent a set of reading materials. Access to the printed materials was considered valuable by the participants. As they became more familiar with the web based learning platform used by the University of Minho (Blackboard) they were expected to download course readings from the course site. Clarity of resource organisation on the web was also an important issue.

*I wish we had been given more readings (FTE 2009)
Different tutors put materials in different places. Some put among course documents while others in assignments so it wasn't done in one way. Because it was done differently it was a bit difficult but we had been taught how to access materials in the first week. (FTE 2009)*

Interaction

The course was designed in such a way which allowed for interaction with not only content, but for extensive learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction, as well as interaction with the community in which students worked. Participants were given the incentive to participate in chat and discussion board by having the opportunity to get their final grades upgraded through regular participation in these collaborative media. Having the time and the ability to network and to interact with other learners, and with instructors (including an adequate proficiency in English language where instructors are from international universities), appear to have been crucial for successful completion of the online course.

Interaction with Instructors

The course participants expected a high degree of interaction, support and feedback from the instructors as is evidenced in the feedback forms completed by them in the first week of face to face instruction at the beginning of the course.

The participants requested support and feedback included having regular interactive communication through chat and discussion board/ forums. Participants desired that sufficient guidance be given on how to complete the assignments and to be given feedback till they achieved a high level of success and a good grade as well as for this feedback to be timely and detailed with suggestions on how to improve their work.

They also expected quick responses to their questions and queries online. Participants were informed that the level of interaction and feedback by instructors may not be at the level expected by them due to instructors' workloads and other responsibilities.

Instructor feedback was at times slower than students desired as students had one opportunity to get written feedback on assignments and for a resubmission. From the interviews, it was evident that students had different levels of support and interaction with different instructors and that allocation of time for interaction is an important factor for success especially with students taking an online course for the first time, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

Some lecturers didn't give sufficient feedback. For example, when we write in the forum to clear doubts, some instructors don't respond promptly (FTE 2009).

In the first unit, even at the school if I get time I used to go online and check (e-mail). In that unit because there wasn't anything much, I lost interest and couldn't give much time (FS2009).

Participants' level of anxiety about participating in a postgraduate course and in an online course was evident in their request at the beginning of the course for the instructors to be kind, cooperative and patient with them, as well as to not sanction for lack of accuracy in use of English Language, as evidenced in the feedback forms completed by the course participants at the beginning of the course.

In addition, the necessity for students who are going to participate in an online course to have completed a further education program on use of written English language for academic study is evident through following comments:

When I started I also didn't know how to respond to e-mails. So, for someone on an online course, that's also an important thing to know. That's the only way we can work online collaboratively knowing how to respond to e-mails and how to comment on what has been written (FTE2009).

There were some communication difficulties. When students sent questions at times it needed to be sent again and again for the tutors to understand what the question was about (FSH 2009).

Interaction in Chat Rooms and on the Asynchronous Discussion Board

The participants identified the discussion board as a useful forum for discussion of coursework. Asynchronous discussion forum gave time for participants to formulate the questions before hand, to think of what to ask and to think about the responses which were given. The participants did monitor what was said on the online discussion forums even when they didn't actively participate; valuing learning by monitoring what has been said by other students.

In the forum they (instructors) put on questions and we respond. If we have doubts, we also put up questions...and if there is an assignment coming up we might brainstorm about the assignment. So, on the forum there are brainstorming sessions (FTE2009).

I usually wrote on the forum. When I write on the forum I get responses as well and when I check to see what others have asked and what they have been told as well I get information (FS 2009).

The chat sessions were used to discuss technical problems in accessing and using the platform, to provide specific guidance on assignments and other issues, to clear doubts on terminology and to explain concepts, as the following excerpts illustrate:

We had online chat sessions once a week or twice a week for some modules. We met other participants in the first week and then during the examinations. There were participants who had become friends during chat sessions but we only knew their names and met during the examination time but didn't recognize. It was really nice to know them.

We clear doubts in the chat sessions. In the chat sessions they usually inform what the chat will be about. ... but the general chat with all, what happens is that everyone's focus is not on the learning or on that topic so when they are not interested in the topic they will begin some other discussion. Because they can ask any question they want, they do (FTE 2009).

Maria Alfredo: how is it going?

S: after going through the chat recordings now I have understood how it should be done.

Maria Alfredo: great. What did you choose?

S: I have chosen the questionnaire "self evaluation inventory"

S: is it alright?

S: on evaluation

Maria Alfredo: yes, of course. and you used it for the evaluation of your practice? or with a teacher?

S: I have to adapt some of the questions to Maldivian context.

S: Is it alright to do?

Maria Alfredo: ok. so you place the questionnaire, adapted and write about its use

Maria Alfredo: I believe that happens most of the time... adapting materials to our own context

S: Yes, of course.

S: So I can do it with one of the teachers, reflect on it and then write the assignment, right?

Maria Alfredo: Yes, right

(20/Out/2008)

HS: But once again let know what do u mean by 'cause beyond oneself'

Maria Alfredo: Ok.

Maria Alfredo: that expression is used by glickman et al

Maria Alfredo: to call one's attention to the fact that teachers and schools

Maria Alfredo: have to have a collective purpose, an aim

HS: ok

Maria Alfredo: that serves the group, not an individual or a specific group with specific interests (18/Set/2008)

Since this was the first time participants were interacting online, to get to a stage where chat sessions were used effectively for learning took considerable time and effort. Participants preferred to use chat since doubts can be cleared instantly. However, synchronous communication also took its toll on participants' learning opportunities, as their availability to be online at the same time as the instructor - they were on different time zones -, and the technical problems in establishing connection added to course difficulty:

Because a friend ... sent me an SMS to say that the instructor was online so I went online. She couldn't even respond to my question when the line was disconnected. Because we are busy with our own teaching it is difficult to be online at the same time as the instructor (excerpt from a student who quit the course early on, FSH 2009).

I never got a chance to go online and participate in a chat session with the lecturer because I wasn't free at that time. There were extra classes even at night. By the time I completed work and went the instructor wasn't online (excerpt from a participant who quit the course early on, FT 2009). The chat sessions are guided. In the previous chat session we would have been told what the next chat session will be about and will be told to read specific papers before coming to the session, if there are doubts when reading, to bring those doubts and if we have questions to ask them so no one will have an opportunity to go outside the topic... But in other tutors' chat sessions sometimes the conversations drift and are controlled by a few. In those chat sessions, the gains that could be made aren't made (FTE 2009)

Towards the end of the course, participants had begun to use chat sessions as a substitute for classroom interaction which occurs in a face to face classroom. Upon participants request chat recordings were made available on the learning platform, thus allowing for learning from others as well as giving more time to reflect on what is discussed.

In the ICT module it was compulsory to go on the chat session. In that module, we would know what to do also by going in the chat session. There was a recording of the chat session as well. That was put on request by us. That was really useful for us. (FTE2009)

Interaction with Other Learners

While online learning seems to be something done by individuals sitting alone on computers, this is not the image of online learning that came up in this study. Those who had good communication skills and interaction skills talked for hours on the phone discussing how to do assignments, each one sharing what they understood.

We usually discussed everything with each other. ...when if any of us has a need and want to have a bigger discussion that person would call. Sometimes we talk for even an hour by phone. Sometimes even if one of us is abroad they would make international calls and discuss. (FTE 2009)

Interaction with other course participants often did not go the way the program was designed to allow for course participants from same islands and neighbouring islands to support each other. Interaction with other members who were of opposite gender and had higher social status within the community was sometimes problematic as well as with those who couldn't commit a sufficient amount of time for collaborative work.

Because we all couldn't meet, we kept postponing the assignment. I also had completed the sections I had to do and was waiting to complete the sections we had to do together. We couldn't meet and so ... I hadn't completed the assignment (FS2009)

Rather than communicating across established hierarchies within the same island group, participants preferred to communicate with colleagues and friends across the islands.

We had a huge support group among ourselves. We never completed an assignment without consulting each other. Even though those on the island as a group weren't able to work together well, there were others with whom we worked. I worked with a course participant who was in India following another course and two other teacher educators. We never completed an assignment without talking to each other online or by phone. When we talk we realize that each of us understood the assignment differently so the talking made it clearer (FTE2009)

Mentoring and Support

A local mentor who was based in Male' the capital was assigned six to seven participants for mentoring. The grouping was by geographical regional divisions and by group size.

The support provided by the mentors was very significant in staying on the course. The main component of this support was the level of encouragement given to complete the course, in addition to overcoming technical difficulties and to help with course design issues.

The local mentor based in Male' used to call often to see how far we have got on with the assignments. Because he did that, even if we were busy at school and had become careless with the coursework then I used to think he might call again so thinking of that also I used to feel bad (that I could not complete on time) (FS2009).

He told me he believed I could complete the course successfully. It was nice to know he had seen the work I had done such as what I had posted on the discussion forum (FT 2009). There was a time when we couldn't access the university website at all so we spoke to our group coordinator... She would always take action even if we send an SMS or make a phone call so that also was really encouraging. But with things we could do ourselves, we spoke to each other and solved it. (FTE2009)

Course participant support was the most significant factor in enabling for completion of the course, mentioned by all the participants in this study. Support and encouragement from other participants and from their families was paramount to maintain the necessary motivation to complete the course, even though not enough to overcome constraints due to pregnancy and work pressure:

*My husband and my mum and my older sister gave lot of support. They took care of the children so I can spend time doing the work (FS 2009)
My local mentor also came to the island and spoke to me and advised me. It gave me encouragement... My husband also encouraged me to do it but I wasn't in a condition to do it (FT 2009)*

DISCUSSION

The course described in this study was designed and taught by Minho University instructors, with initial input on course design including topics for study, scheduling of teaching terms and examinations and selection of participants as well as continued technical and social support provided and mediated by a team of local experts in continuous professional development.

Even though participants' feedback is positive towards online education, whether they were successful or not in the program; their feedback also indicates the need for interaction with other, supporting, meaningful critical co-constructors of knowledge. Besides interaction with tutors and local facilitators, the participants indicated that peer interaction supported successful completion.

However, these interactions and collaboration cannot be artificially, formally set. Action research (an assignment set by the second author of this text) did not work very well because groups were formed during the face to face week, based on location of the participants rather than ability to work with each other in a collaborative setting.

Leadership for action research was assigned based on social hierarchy. Participants were used to work in a hierarchical setting so they kept excusing themselves from leadership roles in collaborative work, attributing these responsibilities to older, male members who were many times not fully participating in the remaining assignments or actively involved in the course. Since most school heads are male and are used to been seen as the experts within the school setting, not been experts in an online education setting and having to work collaboratively with staff who are seen as more junior to them would have made collaboration almost impossible.

Hence, even though freedom of choice of theme was provided enabling for relevant and meaningful research, conditions were not set right for collaboration. If groups were assigned at the same hierarchical level and within groups who had identical research interests, collaboration may have occurred despite the distance between atolls.

Participants valued guided, structured chat sessions which had an agreed purpose. Valuing their input on how to make chat sessions better as well as having records of chat sessions made available was useful. Participants valued and learned from the discussion forums even when they did not contribute. If discussion forums are designed in such a way that students can take ownership of leading the forums with support from their personal mentors/e-moderators, this can lead to better learning. Making contributing to discussion forums mandatory through inclusion in assessments in the later phases of a program could enable for the quieter participants to gain confidence in engaging in dialogue. Participants indicated they needed to be trained on how to respond to e-mails.

With further training and expertise use of e-mail for learning may increase. While online learning has the image of individuals working by themselves in isolation, this study shows that most of the learning in this course happened through face to face collaboration and through phone discussions between learners.

The course participants who previously knew each other and had same social positions collaborated online and pushed each other to succeed.

They also supported those who were behind in completion of work providing encouragement.

The preferred mode of communication between learners was by phone. This preference for using talk for learning, even when the cost of using phones is higher than e-mailing, indicated a preference for talk over writing by Maldivian students. Since Maldives has such a high rate of mobile phone use, it will be worthwhile to consider the mobile phone technologies participants have access to and train participants on how to use mobile phone technology to access the internet, as well as to use them efficiently and effectively for learning, so that eLearning can truly become possible anytime any place.

Students' level of language proficiency was an issue throughout the course, where much time in online interactions was spent clarifying on meaning of the words and in explaining what the assignments were on. Even from the very beginning students were anxious about their language proficiency and had asked not to be sanctioned for lack of accuracy and fluency in use of English language. Furthermore they wanted instructors to proofread assignments. Lack of fluency and accuracy in the use of the English language affected their online interactive written communication between instructors and themselves. Participation in online language courses for further study would help to develop basic language skills as well as academic skills required for successful participation in graduate courses enabling for increased success rates.

Maldives is a highly visual and oral cultural community. Maldivian students expect from their instructors a degree of personal care and consideration for their welfare and establishment of relationships to a level which is not expected of instructors within a European context.

Students had at the beginning of the course asked for regular interactive oral communication through chat and for use of videos and had explicitly asked the instructors to be kind and patient in their dealings with them as is evidenced in the feedback forms completed by them at the beginning of the course. Workloads and expectations of instructors in a European university did not allow for time and interaction to a level which would have been put in by a Maldivian instructor. Participants' performance in assignments in a course which was designed delivered and assessed using a Eurocentric perspective and which expected fluency and accuracy in use of written English was necessarily constrained.

CONCLUSION

It will be worthwhile to study if students see any benefits of seeing recorded videos of lecturers instructing in a face to face classroom. It is also important to find out whether use of audiovisual learning tools such as film, singing and storytelling, enhance the eLearning experience of Maldivian students. For Maldivians to successfully interact and participate in an online course within a European context, participants will need to be explicitly informed of the differences in expectations in learning styles and engagement. To make online education truly a Maldivian experience, Maldivian values and norms will have to be integrated into the design and delivery such as more time for oral communication, more use of audiovisual materials in selection of content, in delivery as well as in assessment. Time will need to be made available to build relationships, and for provision of a degree of pastoral care for participants such as in allowing for extra time for completion of courses as well as to provide extra tuition for individual learning needs.

In future courses, local mentor support need to be extended to e-moderation of learning on discussion forums (Salmon, 2001). Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2000) suggest that e-moderator should be aware of all postings within discussion forums, encouraging participation and keeping track of the involvement of the students.

While the local mentors performed these duties of e-moderation, mentor participation could have been extended to keep the discussion focussed and to encourage higher order thinking as suggested by Collison et al. A mentor who is familiar with the individual contexts in which the course participants worked would have enabled for more critical reflection and linking of learning to the work contexts of the participants, thus making learning more relevant and meaningful. Local mentors when given access to the university library online facilities can search and identify resources relevant to students learning context and provide access to the students to these resources on the web based learning platform.

The two female participants of this study who completed the course indicated the importance of distance education to provide access to learning for women of child bearing age and those who have other care giving responsibilities which prevent them from accessing other avenues of training and professional development. These two women who completed the course made time for study while juggling work, study and family responsibilities as well as child birth.

They demonstrated intrinsic motivation, willingness to work hard, to do collaborative work and to submit work even if they were not fully satisfied with their level of performance. The other woman in this study dropped out of the course early on, due to illness and heavy work responsibilities, including teaching responsibilities in the evenings which prevented her from attending synchronous sessions with the instructor as well as attending face to face meetings with other course participants from the same island. The reasons for drop out given by the two male participants were lack of support and recognition of learning by their employers as well as uncertainties in accreditation. Some of these reasons for dropping out such as uncertainty in accreditation of online courses, reduced workloads to make time for study, and promotions based on completion of online courses are policy considerations which when sorted out, can lead to more successful engagement in online education.

Starting the program from where the students are; using a familiar context to build skills and vocabulary may have led to higher success rates than was achieved in this course. Starting the program with a module on online education where the concepts and the vocabulary as well as the technology were new may have led to "cognitive overload" (Tyler Smith, 2006). Unfamiliarity with the context would have meant the students may have been unable to link the new to something they already knew and wouldn't have seen the relevance to their work context. Allowing for a more flexible loop of feedback and collaboration on the design and development of the learning program would enable for increased ownership of the learning process by experienced school leaders, who while may be inexperienced in eLearning, would have expectations and targets for their own learning. The challenge lies in setting online learning experiences using distance education where course participants are challenged to review, and consider alternative concepts to those which may be ingrained through years of practice.

In this course, people at different levels of a hierarchical education system were expected to interact in a novel situation where higher position did not mean more expertise. The fear of appearing less competent in a novel learning situation may have been emotionally difficult for course participants, who held senior posts to other course participants and were expected to work with each other collaboratively.

As elders in a hierarchical social structure, they are expected to be more knowledgeable and informed and are seen as mentors and educators for the younger members of the group.

Social hierarchy is an important consideration in selection of participants for a course in the Maldives. Even when a course is offered to a group of people at different levels of hierarchy, interaction within the course needs to be organised so that participants who are at same levels of hierarchy are grouped together. However, those at higher levels of hierarchy can be expected to support groups who are at lower levels, since such support is expected and welcomed by junior members. Those who have previous experiences of online learning can be assigned such mentoring roles.

In summary, participation in an online course which was based on identified needs enabled the participants to engage in relevant and meaningful professional learning while on the job. This had a direct impact on their daily practice as leading teachers in their respective schools.

All participants including those who had dropped out are using the learning they gained from participation in the course in their own teaching in the classroom and for further professional development. This first time experience of eLearning was seen by all five participants as a stepping stone for further online learning for work and career advancement. Collaboration between the course participants is ongoing to expand the eLearning experience they have had to reach the children in their classrooms as well as a means of educating and familiarising parents on use of ICT for teaching and learning. Collaboration between the course instructor and some of the participants continued after the course ended, in a way that will hopefully sustain change and innovation in Maldivian schools, as participants will progressively gain more confidence and feel more empowered to disseminate their work with wider audiences (see Moreira et al., in press).

Online learning imposes constraints that are not in traditional, face to face educational encounters: the social nature of the classroom brings people together, builds and strengthens bonds and relationships that are crucial to learning and collaborative knowledge construction.

However, online learning is also at the service of a more democratic access to knowledge and social inclusion, making available to a wider audience the educational opportunities of, otherwise, a privileged few.

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