

Sustainable Learning Utilizing WhatsApp- A Study

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Abstract

Study materials for centuries were made available in print. But of late, economic concerns and uncertain futures have contributed to a crisis of confidence in print. Sustainability is becoming a key criteria in the pedagogical arena too. This article reports on a study which attempted to explore the possibility of sustainable learning using WhatsApp in an English language Bachelor of Education (BEd) course.

WhatsApp is an extremely popular communication medium among teacher trainees. However little research is known on the type of interactions that occur when teachers are involved in using it a Blended learning mode. The investigator-cum teacher educator, using a mixed method research, collected data both through informal interviews and focus group discussion.

The study reveals that the different interactions between the learners and the teacher educator helped particularly in refining learner perspective of select content of the BEd syllabus. It also found that the collaborative mode helped build learning bonds between the teacher trainees slowly transforming them into a community of learners. The study underscores the possibility of familiarizing teacher trainees with the scope of utilizing WhatsApp for sustainable learning.

KEYWORDS: Collaboration, Facilitator, Language Teacher Education, Sustainable learning, WhatsApp

Introduction

Since 2002, the sustainable development movement has evolved to encompass social justice as a principle of sustainable development. Later many countries across the globe attempted to opt for a paradigm of education for sustainability. Study materials for centuries were made available in print. But of late economic concerns and uncertain futures have contributed to a crisis of confidence in print. Sustainability is becoming a key criteria in the pedagogical arena too. In recent years, attempts have been under way to reorient teacher education to address sustainability (McKeowan & Hopkins, 2014).

This paper reports on a study which works on the researcher-cum-teacher educator's belief that in a developing country like India it is high time that new teachers being prepared today be familiarized with sustainable practices. The rationale being that prospective teachers can create sustainable and resilient communities locally and globally only if they themselves are familiar with a mode that fosters sustainable learning. What follows is the report of a study undertaken to transact content among teacher trainees using WhatsApp discreetly integrating content knowledge, pedagogical

skills and assessment practices in a sustainable learning mode employing internet-based resources.

Brief review of literature

Many students in both the developed and developing countries are increasingly using WhatsApp as a communication platform. Several teachers are also exploring educational possibilities of WhatsApp. There is an emerging evidence that tools such as WhatsApp have a significant potential to support the learning process and has major implication on pedagogies, allowing direct access to lots of online resources, more focus on students' autonomy and responsibility on own learning. For instance, a study conducted by Rambe and Chipunza (2013) revealed that Whatsapp instant messaging has potential to bridge information divide between educators and students.

A study undertaken by the author of this paper (Praveen, 2015) utilizing WhatsApp for content revision was treated as a success story and best practice in the field of education during the International Conference on Educational Management and Administration.

A recent study on the use of WhatsApp for teaching English as a Foreign Language argued that applications such as WhatsApp should be leveraged to encourage autonomous and peer learning (Alshammari et al., 2017)

Sustainability pedagogy according to Sapon-Shevin & Schiedewing, 1991) emphasizes interdependence and collaboration arrived at through projects utilizing the core elements of cooperative learning. Technology in lieu of print have been explored in recent times. For instance, Dan Childers, a senior sustainability scientist and professor of Arizona State University as early as 2013, used a modeling software to teach fundamental ecosystem concepts. He has this to say: "... there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to using technology to educate...I think we should not be afraid of technology...Students tend to be more keen on and capable of using it. There is no common solution that could or should be implemented in each pedagogical situation." (ASU, 2013)

Writing in *Technology Salon* which hosts informal discussions between Information and Communication technology experts, Vota (2018) opined that with its immense popularity and high potential sustainability, WhatsApp can be a game changer for International development.

Research Questions

1. Is sustainable learning possible using WhatsApp for an English teacher training course?
2. What is the English teacher trainee perception towards the use of WhatsApp as a supporting tool in a Blended learning mode?

Materials and methods

A mixed method drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data was used to enhance the possibility of understanding the phenomena. The mixed method comes handy to corroborate the data collected along with interpretations of the data (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Sample

The use of WhatsApp for learning the content of the prescribed syllabus of the Bachelor of Education programme was carried with four groups totalling 24 students pursuing the Bachelor of Education programme in two different government-run colleges of teacher education affiliated to two different Universities in Kerala state-Kannur University and University of Calicut.

Instruments

The instruments used in the study were informal interview, focus group and participant observation involving the teacher educator as facilitator.

Data collection procedure

Select screen shots of the WhatsApp responses of teacher trainees were captured. Informal interviews with all the participants to inquire about the difficulties experienced if any was sought by the teacher educator-cum-researcher. Each week, prior to actual face-to-face classroom sessions, the teacher educator, posed questions with a view to collect data regarding the nature of tasks given, benefit of the type of learning and also difficulties if any experienced. The experiment with each group ended with a Focus group session to enable the researcher to collect essential data regarding teaching using WhatsApp in a Blended mode.

Phases of using WhatsApp

Getting to know each other at the commencement of the course was initiated by asking the trainees to say something about themselves and their hobbies too on a specially created WhatsApp group. Following this, BEd content-related tasks were posted on weekends following the face-to-face instruction in the regular class by the teacher educator.

The initial syllabus-based task utilized a popular movie clip from *English Vinglish*. Besides rousing interest, the clip introduced the participants to the kind of problems faced in learning a second language like English. Along with the task, instructions regarding the format of the answer and the etiquette to be followed while answering were also given.

The tasks that followed necessitated not only reading the bazaar guides in print which the trainees usually refer to, but also available internet resources. Encouragement and tips for answering were provided by the educator, if the trainees failed to post their responses in the set time limit. As the learning progressed, digital BEd content related

materials including infographics, videos, animations and audio files were posted for comparison, reflection and illustration.

The materials were discreetly chosen to lead the trainees from general to specific issues related to language learning. Questions both Higher Order and Lower Order following the Bloom's Taxonomy ensured that trainees reflect on the materials provided, and surf the internet for answering the question posed by the educator.

To ensure fun element into the learning process, videos with humourous content was regularly posted. After almost two months of the commencement of the WhatsApp mode learning, psychological theories of learning were analyzed using cartoons. The procedure employed was a marked shift from the normal one-way lecture mode of classroom communication.

Results and discussion

Specific advantages of using WhatsApp expressed by the participants both during informal interviews and focus group discussion include the following:

* The planned tasks gave plenty of opportunity to work together in groups outside of class time.

* The tasks were interesting and the content received on WhatsApp was a proven motivator for learning.

*Unlike textbook learning, the scope for learning in a collaborative environment in which the teacher educator and peers are always connected 24X7 on the WhatsApp group, obliterated the feeling of isolation normally felt by students in a large class.

* The teacher educator's attempt to flip the class room by providing tasks to be completed on WhatsApp before coming to learn a new topic made possible effective utilization of time.

*The availability of quality BEd related content on WhatsApp, which never incurred any charges at a time when quality education is increasingly becoming a big business helped familiarize the teacher trainees with the possibilities of sustainable teaching-learning practices.

Educators in India are deeply aware of the current tension existing between access and quality in teacher education. The present study is a small step towards sensitizing teacher trainees to sustainable learning practices. In short, this research suggests one way of fulfilling the sustainable development goals of UNESCO : "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"(UNESCO, 2015). A close analysis of the kind of material employed by the teacher educator using WhatsApp to foster interaction among the teacher trainees have lessons to offer for learning content producers in a developing country like India.

While the narrative of the study suggests the effectiveness of WhatsApp, it is only a tiny step towards using it as a teaching-learning tool. The study has the obvious limitation of being conducted on a small group of English teacher trainees. However, further research can be attempted to find the effectiveness of the strategy employed by the teacher educator and its suitability for other subjects also.

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Table 1. Showing distribution of teacher trainees who participated in the WhatsApp and Face-to-face Blended mode study.

Group No.	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Name of College	Govt. Brennen College of Teacher Education, Thalassery	Govt. Brennen College of Teacher Education, Thalassery	Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Thrissur	Institute of Advanced Study in Education, Thrissur
Name of University	Kannur University	Kannur University	University of Calicut	University of Calicut
Year of study	2015	2017	2018	2019
No. of participants	09	05	05	05