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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Situated Learning Theory: An Integration with Online Theological Education

Dr Taimaya Ragui¹

Abstract: Learning is most effective when situated in the learner's context, particularly in the context of distance and online theological education. Learning theory (situated learning), online learning (blended learning), and theological education (distance/online theological education) are interfaced within the framework of a theological paradigm that recognises the significance of being contextually rooted. Various learning modes are examined, including synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, and different types of blended learning, within the context of some Asian and African institutional settings. The focus is on how these modes can be utilised by learners and course/curriculum designers to align with the learners' specific context. This is done by showing different types of learning activities that encompass the essential aspects of situated learning, such as activities that allow for participation in collective endeavours and authentic environments.

Keywords: situated learning, online theology, blended learning, hyflex model, contextual theology, communities of practice

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the field of online learning-education² has seen notable growth and discussion, largely attributed to technological advancements and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend has gained traction in both the Global

¹ Dr Taimaya Ragui serves as the Academic Lead of The Shepherd's Academy of The Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life.

² I have hyphenated the term "learning" with "education" to emphasize the distinctiveness of *online learning-education* as a sub-discipline of education and the need to develop its pedagogies (and/andragogies) as an interdisciplinary field of study (e.g., online theological education) in the Global South.

North³ and the Global South (Allied Market Research 2021).⁴ Despite its growing popularity, traditional educators, if not all, remain sceptical about the efficacy of online theological education due to its inherent challenges and apparent absence of contextualization or formation (see Jo Ann Deasy 2021), particularly in the Global South.⁵ There is a disparity between the context of the learners and the mode of learning and learning activities used by theological educators, when online education is involved.⁶ This circumstance, I argue, necessitates that we connect our learning experiences to the context of the learners. In terms of learning design, I argue for the need to combine a learning theory known as situated learning with online theological education; that is, to incorporate the learner's context into theologically based online theological education (see Diane Hockridge 2021). This is also to suggest that online theological education can be most effective in the Global South – and also, other parts of the world – when theological educators and/or course-curriculum designers consider the context of the learners when designing, developing, and delivering online theology courses. The scope of this research is limited to the needs and concerns of *The Shepherd's Academy's* (hereafter, TSA) partners in Asia (India, Nepal, and Pakistan), Africa (South Sudan, Zambia, Kenya, Gambia, Cameroon, Uganda, South Africa, and Nigeria), and a South American academy (Guyana).⁷

The incarnation of Jesus is proposed as a theological paradigm for a contextualised approach to online theological education (Dean Flemming 2005: 20). This is to acknowledge that Jesus embraced the humanity and context of humankind: he was born as a man in a particular historical setting, within a specific culture, spoke their language, involved in the practices and traditions of that culture, and impacted the lives of those in the same context through his words and action. Furthermore, the theory of situated learning is advocated to engage efficiently in contextual online theological education, where such learning theory-design underlines the importance of context and its impact on knowledge acquisition (Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger 1991) – as well as character formation within a given community of learning. This proposal posits that learning is most effective when it takes place in the context in which it will be used, rather than in a disconnected, abstract setting. The purpose of integrating a theological paradigm, a learning theory, and theological education is to

³ The term Global North refers to the North American context and countries with significant technological and digital learning advancements. While the term Global South refers to countries or regions that are socially, economically, and technologically disadvantaged i.e., those that lack digital tools and resources for online education.

⁴ According to Allied Market Research, Asia is likely to see exponential growth in online learning (or e-learning) in the next few years (Allied Market Research 2021).

⁵ However, the necessity to design and deliver contextualised online courses/programmes is felt throughout disciplines, not simply theological studies. For instance, Rosa Maria Bottino and Elisabetta Robotti argue that proper contextualisation is “decisive in making educational software effective; otherwise, the potential of even the best programme will remain largely unexploited” (2007: 174–186).

⁶ In my experience with several institutions in the Global South, people's perception of online education is typically restricted to synchronous learning in the form of virtual meetings like Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams.

⁷ TSA is the undergraduate department of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life (OCRPL). See <https://shepherds.academy/> (Accessed 28 July 2023).

provide learners in the Global South with a theologically grounded-contextual learning experience.

This paper is presented in a threefold manner. First, it looks into the theological foundations of why online theological education in the Global South should be situated in the context of the learners. The suggested answer is the incarnation of Jesus as the paradigm for engaging in theological education. Second, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's situated learning theory will be introduced, with an emphasis on its application to online theological education. Third, building on the work of Lave and Wenger, additional efforts will be made to demonstrate why understanding context is critical for adopting an effective online mode and designing online lessons and activities that are contextually relevant to the learners, fostering collaboration among them, providing immediate feedback, and encouraging reflection.

2. Preliminary: Incarnation as a Learning Paradigm

Most academic literature pertaining to Christian online learning or online theological education centres on the pedagogical strategies for instructing biblical or theological subjects in a virtual environment (See, for example, Thorne 2013; Flynn 2013; Babyak 2015; Ascough 2018; Ascough et al., 2018; Beech 2021). Consequently, there is a tendency to overlook the significance of establishing a biblical or theological grounding for online theological education that occurs within a community of learners or religious organisation. This suggests that there have been few efforts to establish a biblical/theological framework for online theological education.

It is observed that the reason for efforts to build a biblical or theological framework stems from the assumption that online education should be backed by biblical theology (Thorne 2013; 99-109) or theological argument (Graham 2006: 24-28). According to James A. Thorne, "A concern for the validity of online biblical education requires a careful look at good educational pedagogy based upon biblical principles in order to effectively provide Christian higher education" (2013: 99). Given that theological education involves dealing with knowledge and truth as well as learners, such theological support is regarded as necessary for a learning community. Thorne's biblical reasoning is based on "Paul's comment in 1 Cor 9:19–22 which calls for the proclamation of the gospel by all means possible" (2013: 100). He goes on to suggest that constructivism be used to provide "student-centred knowledge, truth-oriented perception, individually transformed information, and an actively constructed worldview" (2013: 102). The constructivist concept is used as a tool to achieve theological education goals. Thorne attempts to provide a biblical framework by way of integrating with humanist educational philosophy i.e., use constructivism to provide biblical online education. However, he does not elaborate on developing a biblical framework or theology to guide online theological educator engagements. You find such similar engagement in the works of Andrew T. Babyak (2015: 63-77). While attempting to develop "a Christian virtual environment" for online theological educators, he compiles a list of texts that discuss knowledge (Gal 3:7; Eph 5:5; 6:22; Phil 1:12), human limitation and the ability to know God (Rom 11:33-34), the need to encourage (Rom 1:8, 11) and pray for learners (Rom 1:9-10), and the importance of

teaching and learning a Christian worldview (Eph. 2) (Babyak 2015: 65-67). These works are helpful for starting a conversation about developing a biblical framework for online engagements, but their use of biblical texts appears to be peripheral.

In John Gresham's work, we find an attempt to provide a theological model for online theological education (2006: 24-28). This may serve as an alternative to the peripheral selection of passages that have been presented previously. This may also be seen as a response to "the criticism that theological education has been driven by pragmatic concerns to embrace educational technologies without due consideration of theological issues" (Gresham 2006: 24). Gresham argues for "divine pedagogy, the way God teaches humanity," as a theological pedagogy/model for online education (2006: 24). He draws this theological pedagogy from *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy 1998) which was published in 1998 by "the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy as a guide for catechetical ministry within the Roman Catholic Church" (Gresham 2006: 24). With the notion that this theological pedagogy has its roots in "a broader Christian and Jewish biblical tradition" – and not just the Roman Catholic one (See, for example, Alexander 2001), Gresham suggests that "the divine pedagogy originates from the church fathers especially as a way to describe the progressive preparation for the coming of Christ" (Gresham 2006: 25). The central emphasis of divine pedagogy is "adaptation" as the document states, "God willing to speak to [humankind] as friends manifests in a special way [God's] pedagogy by adapting what [God] has to say by solicitous providence for our earthly condition" (Congregation for the Clergy 1998: 146). According to Gresham, "online education can represent such adaptation" to the needs of learners, and it can also assist theological educators in considering "the online environment as a part of the contemporary cultural context to which theological education must adapt" (2006: 25-26). In the final section of the paper, I propose that in order to be located in the context of the learner, context-specific modes and learning activities are required to maximise the learning experience.

This paper expands on Gresham's suggestion to locate online theological education within the contemporary cultural context by proposing the incarnation of Jesus as a learning paradigm for theological educators, particularly when adopting an online mode. This theological or learning paradigm emphasises both the need for theological underpinning and the need to be situated in the context of the people. In *Contextualization in the New Testament*, Flemming asserts, "The incarnation of Jesus serves as a key paradigm for contextualized mission and theology" (2005: 20). In this context, contextualization refers to the process of adapting the gospel message to the language and culture of a specific learning context. In order to make the message of the gospel accessible to humankind, God assumed human form through the incarnation. Furthering Flemming's argument, I would contend that the incarnation of Jesus can serve as a theological/learning paradigm for online theological education. This provides a compelling paradigm for online theological education, which requires a similar process of translation into a digital context. According to Huang Po Ho, considering the Asian context for theological construction and educating would imply attempting to "locate where we are and thereby indicate our area of responsibility and

concern, namely, the varieties and dynamics of Asian realities" (Po Ho 2008: 5). Similarly, for Susan Murithi, to engage in contextual theological education in Africa, it would mean recognising that "the only kind of education with the power to form humanity is the one that relates to them and addresses their unique situations, and answers their questions" (Murithi 2014: 45).

Considering this reality, the incarnation as a learning paradigm provides a framework for understanding how to communicate the gospel in the context of the learners. Flemming contends that Jesus embraced "the human context in all of its 'scandalous particularity' – as a male Palestinian Jew, 'born of a woman, born under the law' (Gal 4.4) – in a specific time and place" (2005: 20). Moreover, he participated in "the Jewish culture; he participated in its celebrations and traditions; he spoke Aramaic with Galilean accent; he had distinctive physical features and personality traits" (2005: 20). This same principle should be applied to online theological education. To communicate effectively in the digital context, theological education must be translated into the language and cultural forms of the online environment.

The incarnation also serves as a model for how to interact with individuals in a digital context. Jesus did not simply communicate a message to people from a distance; he entered their world and engaged with them on their terms – so that they would understand or learn. This is evident in his interactions with the culture of the time. Flemming suggests, "Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, his teaching on the law and righteousness, and his use of life-specific parables drew upon language, thought categories and rhetorical traditions from the Jewish culture of his day" (2005: 21). The same strategy can also be applied to online theological education. Rather than simply broadcasting information to learners, theological educators can enter the digital world of their learners and engage with them on their terms.

And the incarnation of Jesus can provide us with tools for our approach to online learning and online lessons and activities. This should be accompanied by the necessity of recognising the cultural distinctions of various contexts. For example, if I were to teach an online course about online theological education in Northeast India (of which I am a part), I would have to address not only the challenges, but also the misconceptions about online education in the region (See, for example, Ragui 2023). Flemming argues that Jesus mediated "the good news in ways that were appropriate to particular people and occasions" (2005: 21). This is to recognise that "Jesus spoke differently to the crowds than he did to the Pharisees, differently to Nicodemus than to Peter. He tailored his exposition of the gospel to the situation at hand" (Flemming 2005: 21). If we apply this principle to online learning, we must also recognise that the digital context has its own cultural values and worldviews with which we must engage to communicate effectively.

Having said this, as theological educators, or course-curriculum designers, we also must consider the goals of online theological education. We must ask why we are offering online theological education to our learners. This may mean asking the following questions: 'What is the purpose of online theological education? How do you, as a theological educator, carry out the task of formation via online platforms?' We may

find answers to these questions in the understanding that “Jesus came to transform human institutions he entered, and as a result the incarnation retained a universal significance” (Flemming 2005: 22). Fleming argues, “His message of the kingdom, although it was articulated in language and symbols thoroughly familiar to the Jewish hearers, had a boundary-breaking character and a cosmic eschatological vision that transcended his own social location and culture” (2005: 22). To put it simply, online theological education should not be just about sharing information, but it should transform the lives of the learners i.e., it should result in formation (Smith 2009; chap. 6).

If this is the case (i.e., if theological education is to be incarnational and purpose-driven), then this paper poses and attends to the following questions: ‘What does it mean for theological education to embrace the incarnation of Jesus? What does it mean for online theological education to accept incarnation as a learning paradigm?’ As a response to these questions, the following sections present a learning theory that invites theological educators and/or course-curriculum designers to situate their learning experience within the context of the learners; it also attempts to outline possible learning modes and learning activities (or exercises) that would initiate learners to become situated within their context.

3. Situated Learning Theory

The notion of Jesus embracing the human context lends support to the claim that individuals are most capable of optimal learning when they are located in their own contextual environment. Instead of restricting learning solely to cognitive processes, the focus is on situating learners and their learning experiences within a community of practice. This part will now explore the theory of situated learning and its key features, while also considering its potential application in the context of online theological education.

In recent decades, situated learning theory has been the subject of much discussion and research across disciplines. Researchers in a number of fields, such as cognitive science, education, and sociology, have contributed to the expansion and improvement of the theory (See, for example, Brown 1989; Anderson, Reder, and Simon 1996; Arnseth 2008; Saigal 2012; Catalano 2015; Greenhow, Graham, and Koehler 2022). In recent years, some attempts have been made to integrate situated learning theory with online education, particularly in the field of integrating technology into educational pursuits (See, for example, Oliver 1999; Herrington, et al., 2000; Slaouti 2007; Shaltry, et al., 2013; Buldan 2021; Schott and Marshall 2018; Archambault, Leary, and Rice 2022). Similar initiatives are currently underway in various Christian studies (Kemp 2010; Grey 2012; Westerlund 2021). This paper builds on the work of Lave and Wenger to argue that theological educators in the Global South should consider the context of the learners when attempting to interface online learning with theological education. It emphasises learning in context and through social interactions, over abstract instruction alone (Brown 1989). It refers to the

notion that learning occurs situations or contexts and that knowledge is acquired through participation in social activities.⁸

The concept of situated learning can be traced back to the works of Lave and Wenger in the 1980s (See also Lave 1988). Lave and Wenger argued that learning should be understood as a social and cultural process that occurs through participation in communities of practice. They argued that learning cannot be understood as a process of acquiring knowledge and skills in isolation, but rather as a process of becoming a member of a community of practice and engaging in the activities and practices of that community. According to Lave and Wenger, "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (1991: 29). In another setting, Lave discusses the concept of situated learning where knowledge is viewed as a collection of tools that are stored in a person's memory (1988: 24). These tools are retrieved and used by that person, with frequency and appropriateness being key factors in their effective use. Once the tools have been utilised, they are returned to storage without any alteration during the process. Furthermore, Lave and Wenger highlight the importance of a concept called "legitimate peripheral participation" in the learning process, where learners engage in tasks that are meaningful and relevant to the community, but they do not yet have the full knowledge and skills of a more experienced member (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29). In other words, it serves as a means of discussing the interactions between individuals who are new to a particular community and those who have been established members for a longer period of time. Additionally, it facilitates discourse surrounding various "activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 29).

From their explanation of situated learning and what it entails, we can deduce four defining features of legitimate peripheral participation. The first feature concerns *peripheral participation*. They define peripherality in terms of a "multiple, varied, more - or less -engaged and - inclusive ways of being located in the fields of participation defined by a community" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). Situating oneself within the "social world" is essential to their definition of peripheral participation; and changing one's physical location and point of view are components of the "learning trajectories, identity development, and forms of membership" that learners pursue (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). If this understanding aligns with their explanation of situated learning, it will imply that individuals who are new to a community of practice initially focus on peripheral tasks that are less taxing and play a lesser role in achieving the overall goals of the community. This makes it possible for them to gradually become acquainted with the customs, values, and practices of the community.

The second feature has to do with increasing participation or *legitimate peripherality*. This is a position or "a place in which one moves toward more-intensive participation" from peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). While this position can be disempowering as they have not fully participated in the community, "it can itself be a

⁸ This theory has its underpinning in social development theory (Vygotsky 1978).

source of power or powerlessness, in affording or preventing articulation and interchange among communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 36). However, as the learners or newcomers become more acquainted with the customs of the community, they are gradually given more responsibility and allowed to participate in a greater variety of central activities. They can improve their skills and knowledge as a result of this gradual increase in their participation.

The third feature relates with learning through practice or *full participation*. According Lave and Wenger, “Full participation is intended to do justice to the diversity of relations involved in varying forms of community membership” (1991: 37). They further suggest that full participation “stands in contrast to only one aspect of the concept of peripherality as we see it: It places the emphasis on what partial participation is not, or not yet (Lave and Wenger 1991: 37). Full participation in the practices of the community facilitates learning. New learners or newcomers learn by observing, asking questions, and attempting new tasks under the supervision of more experienced members. Hence, the ambiguity of defining the position of peripheral and full participation is connected to “issues of legitimacy, of the social organisation of and control over resources, if it is to gain its full analytical potential” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 37).

The fourth feature relates with *socialization* or learning in the context of the social world. Lave and Wenger argues for a shift from “the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world, and from the concept of cognitive process to the more-encompassing view of social practice” (1991: 43). They suggest that “The social relations of apprentices within a community change through their direct involvement in activities; in the process, the apprentices’ understanding and knowledgeable skills develop” (Lave and Wenger 1991: 94). Therefore, learning involves not only acquiring skills and knowledge but also becoming a member of a community of practice. Newcomers are socialised into the norms, values, and practices of the community, which shapes their identity as community members.

4. Learning Modes and Activities in Online Theological Education

The notion that individuals acquire knowledge most effectively within a community of practice, wherein they actively participate in authentic tasks alongside seasoned professionals, prompts an examination of the practical implications of this theory. This implies, particularly within the scope of this research, the examination of the significance of online approaches/modes and learning activities in relation to the specific circumstances of the learners when situated learning theory is integrated with online theological education. In other words, it would mean considering the modes of online learning that considers or best fits the context of the learners, as well as designing online learning activities that simulate real-world situations and offer opportunities for social interaction and collaboration among learners.

4.1 Modes of Online Learning

It is critical to consider the context of the learners when determining the mode of delivery, as this will help course-curriculum designers and institutions in developing online courses sensitive of the context of the learners. For example, between the pre-Covid and post-Covid eras, there was a significant difference or shift in attitude and practice regarding online education and online theological education in India. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, there was widespread opposition to online theological education and, to a lesser extent, to online education in the secular context. One could argue that educational institutions and theological colleges/seminaries were slow to adopt online learning or used limited digital learning platforms prior to the pandemic (Muthuprasad, et al., 2021). Theological and secular institutions were forced to adapt to some form of online learning because of several national lockdowns (See Express Web Desk 2021). Over time, Indian colleges, universities, and theological colleges/seminaries adopted online education alongside the top institutions/ universities in the world (Kumar 2021).

When theological colleges and seminaries were compelled to adopt some form of online learning, they primarily adopted *synchronous* learning, a mode of online learning that requires online presence-interaction between the instructor and all enrolled learners at the same time.⁹ Most theological colleges and seminaries, if not all of them, used Zoom or Google Meet to deliver online lectures. In response to the need for emergency adaptation to online learning, synchronous learning was perceived as a more feasible alternative to facilitate the transition from traditional face-to-face (hereafter, f2f) classroom instruction. Although synchronous learning has certain limitations, especially in situations where there is a digital divide between different demographic groups such as gender, age, location, and socioeconomic status, it is a preferred mode of instruction for many teachers and theological educators, even if it is not the preferred mode for their learners (Bedenlier, et al. 2021).

Hence, many learners opt for *asynchronous* learning as a preferred mode due to its temporal and geographical independence (See, for example, Bernard 2004; Clark and Mayer 2016; Xie et al. 2019). This mode of learning is characterised by individualised and self-paced instruction, with less reliance on the instructor/teacher for guidance. Asynchronous learning involves the provision of educational materials, including lessons and assignments, to learners who are given a specific timeframe within which to complete coursework and examinations. Many teachers and theological educators of online theology courses have found that short, asynchronous courses are beneficial for enhancing their knowledge and skills in the field of online education while remaining in their current position of employment or ministry.¹⁰ In the capacity of an online facilitator, it has been observed that Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

⁹ Charles Hodges and others suggest that a distinction must be made between online courses that were developed during an emergency and those that are well-developed (2020).

¹⁰ One such platform is the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) Academy, which offers “certified professional training for theological educators.” Over the past two years, I have gained a great deal of knowledge and experience both as a learner and as an educator-facilitator. See <https://icete.academy/> (Accessed 13 April 2023).

such as Coursera, edX, Udemy, Swayam, among others, have proven to be highly advantageous in enhancing their proficiency and expertise.¹¹ These platforms are advantageous, especially for acquiring knowledge on learning theory or learning design, and for conducting a concentrated and in-depth study on a topic of personal interest and need, despite their tendency to lack human interaction.

Many theological institutions have implemented a combination of asynchronous and synchronous learning modalities, commonly referred to as *blended* or hybrid learning, to accommodate in-person educational possibilities and remote learning potential. As per Tony Bates' view, this form of online education pertains to the comprehensive restructuring of traditional classroom-based courses, which effectively harnesses the potential of technology (Bates 2015: 344). The proposed approach involves the integration of online education with targeted in-person or f2f small group interactions, or a hybrid model that combines virtual and hands-on classroom experiences. It can be posited that this form of online education combines the favourable aspects of web-based learning with the established methodologies of traditional in-person learning. While online education is not ideal in locations where there are digital divides, a college or seminary can use one or more types of the following blended learning to nurture their learners since blended learning combines elements of f2f learning with online learning.

In a *rotation model*,¹² the programme provides courses in which learners “rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion between learning modalities, at least one of which is online learning,” while other modalities may involve various learning activities (Staker and Horn 2012: 8). For example, in The Shepherd’s Academy (TSA), we offer modular courses that are delivered using a blended learning approach that combines online content created by subject experts with self-study, peer group learning under the supervision of a qualified mentor, and weekly tutorial meetings. The courses are facilitated through an online Learning Management System (LMS) that is readily available for access. Learners engage in weekly self-study lessons of fully manuscript content, actively partake in learning activities and assignments, and then engage in guided tutorial sessions to discuss and reflect on their acquired knowledge. This approach is well-suited for our predominantly remote learners, both in Africa and South Asia, who are either currently involved in ministry or preparing to enter a ministerial context. This is also suitable for any context, which focuses on theological education at the grassroots level in the Global South. This approach to online education can be considered context sensitive.

In the *flex or hyflex model*, the course content and instruction are predominantly delivered through online platforms; learners have the flexibility to progress through various learning modalities at their own pace, tailored to their individual needs; and the teacher-of-record is physically present at the learning site or study centres (Staker

¹¹ See <https://www.coursera.org/>; <https://www.edx.org/>; <https://www.udemy.com/>; <https://swayam.gov.in/> (Accessed 13 April 2023).

¹² Also consider *station model* in which “within a given course or subject (e.g., math), students rotate on a fixed schedule or at the teacher’s discretion among classroom-based learning modalities. The rotation includes at least one station for online learning” (Staker and Horn 2012).

and Horn 2012: 12). This instructional approach is contextually adaptable as it incorporates the pedagogical principles of hybrid and flexible learning. During the COVID-19, for instance, as a Bible college in Sri Lanka grappled with the needs of learners and online education, they adopted this learning strategy and supported the learners in benefiting from it (Ragui and Hunukumbura 2023). In terms of learning approach, they combined f2f learning with online learning and flexibility (i.e., they could attend class online or in-person at the centres).

In a *self-blended model*, learners choose to supplement their traditional or informal courses with one or more online courses, and “the teacher-of-record” is the online instructor (Staker and Horn 2012: 14). Learners may take this “online courses either on the brick-and-mortar campus or off-site” and it ought to be differentiated from full-time online learning (Staker and Horn 2012: 14). This type online learning model can be used both at the formal and informal learning settings. In a modular or semester-long course, for instance, learners may be offered an online nano-course to supplement their f2f or classroom learning. In my experience, this type for learning can be used to complement in-person workshop i.e., by having learners take an online course and then attend a workshop for f2f interaction and learning.¹³

In the *enriched-virtual model*, learners are required to divide their time between campus attendance or f2f class and remote learning via online delivery of content and instruction (Staker and Horn 2012: 15). In other words, learners are expected to participate in f2f sessions with the course facilitator and complete their assignments online (Krismadinata, et al. 2020). For example, some seminaries or study centres require their learners to attend course work (e.g., research methodology, research and writing, etc.) and then complete the remainder of the course or writing projects remotely (e.g., assignment, writing project) at both the ministerial and higher research levels.

4.2 Integration of Context and Learning Activities

Implementing Lave and Wenger’s situated learning in online theological education would require a theological institution to develop a good relationship with churches, Christian organizations, or NGOs. It would also require the development of online learning platforms that facilitate the formation of authentic communities of practice and the provision of opportunities for participation in collective activities and authentic contexts. The purpose of such collective learning activity or experience is to help learners in engaging in peripheral participation and gradually progressing to more central positions i.e., from peripheral participation to legitimate peripherality, full participation, and socialisation.

¹³ In relation to our discussion, several online courses from ICETE Academy have been used by a number of scholars in various parts of the world to fulfil this learning approach. I have the privilege of facilitating several of these workshops and webinars (ICETE Academy 2022).

5.2.1 Case-Based Learning

Peripheral participants gradually enhance their learner involvement and knowledge over time by engaging in authentic activities. In order to promote peripheral participation in the context of online education (i.e., blended learning), it is recommended that instructional contents and tasks be designed in a manner that facilitates active engagement of the learners (See, for example, Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver 2006). Regarding online theological education, it is recommended to integrate problem-solving tasks or case studies into the learning design. For our purposes at TSA, integrating case-based learning or case studies with an online theology course can facilitate a peripheral learning experience for our learners. By designating authentic tasks, the following case-based learning prepares learners for peripheral participation.

Course: Christians in the Public Space – I

Task: As part of the course, learners are required to visit a campaigning organisation to do a case-based study. They are encouraged to schedule an in-person visit to an organisation that addresses issues of poverty, human rights, religious freedom, or justice. They are expected to have conversations with individuals who *run* the organisation, either as trustees or executives. Furthermore, they are instructed to engage in a conversation related to the organisation's history, activities, and future plans. The responses from the learners will serve as the premise for a reflection paper on their visit.

Learners: These learners are in their second year of the Bachelor of Theology programme. They are church leaders from the Global South, primarily Africa and Asia, who are already engaged in ministry and mission work. This learning task requires learners to write a reflection paper based on their conversation with the organisation's policymakers.¹⁴

Technology: The course is accessible via mobile phones, tablets, and laptops/desktops. The course material (complete manuscript) has already been uploaded to the learning management system, Moodle. They meet virtually once per week with fellow learners and their course instructor-facilitator using Zoom or Google Meet.

The above learning task is an example of case-based learning, a pedagogical approach, that involves presenting learners with real-world scenarios and asking them to analyse and solve problems or begin developing their thinking based on their knowledge and skills (Savery and Duffy 1995). In online theological education, case-based learning can be used to simulate ministry situations and provide learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills to real-world contexts.

¹⁴ See <https://shepherds.academy/about-us/> (Accessed 22 May 22, 2023).

Additionally, and depending on the nature of the course, course-curriculum designers have the option to incorporate peer review and feedback into a course or programme, in addition to receiving feedback exclusively from the course facilitator. The course may also require attendance at online seminars or webinars, where learners can gain insight from experts through notetaking, reflection, and gaining expert knowledge. Learners may have the opportunity to participate in weekend ministry or semester-end internships, allowing them to gain firsthand experience and learn from authentic ministry contexts.

5.2.2 Collaborative Learning

In the context of online theology course or programme, increasing participation or legitimate peripherality can be achieved through online discussion forums or collaborative activities. The goal is for the learners to engage in peripheral participation and gradually transition towards more central roles as a learner. As an attempt to bring about collaborative learning, we use online discussion forums in the following manner:

Level: Level 1-3 of Bachelor of Theology.

Tasks: We offer multiple types of discussion forum questions, depending on the nature of the course or subject. They are exploratory questions, which help learners probe information and knowledge; challenge questions, and examine assumptions and presuppositions, or interpret a subject/text; relational questions compare the learners' learning with real-world experience; diagnostic questions search for the motive or cause behind an issue, event, or incident; and action questions are designed to motivate learners to take action about a specific problem/issue in the family, church, or society (Adapted from Davis 2009: 119-20).

Learners: These types of questions occur weekly. Every learner must respond to the query and provide comments on the responses of two other learners. This learning task is intended to teach them how to formulate an opinion on a given topic or issue, as well as how to learn from others as they formulate their opinions and exchange responses. In addition, they receive comments from a subject matter expert tutor.

Technology: We utilise Moodle to create discussion forum questions. They can participate via mobile phones, tablets, and laptop/desktop computers.

In addition to forum questions, other collaborative activities such as virtual group activities, paper presentations, and group projects are utilised. These collaborative activities are premised on the idea that collaborative learning entails learners working in groups to solve problems or complete tasks (See, for example, Johnson and Johnson 1999).

5.2.3 Full Participation

Along with the support of modern technologies that allow for more informal conversation (WhatsApp), reflective conversation (Moodle), and collaborative content creation (conferencing apps), we incorporate a learning pedagogy known as tutorial session, in which learners engage in f2f learning each week (McLoughlin and Lee 2010: 28-43). Our tutorial sessions are not lecture-based, but rather a time when learners' questions are clarified and discussions on a particular topic are continued. They are able to clarify doubts, pose questions, and extend their learning beyond Moodle, whether in-person or virtual f2f. Here, they progress towards full participation in their learning experience. Consider the following aspect of learning in connection with TSA:

Level: Level 1-3 of Bachelor of Theology.

Tasks: In addition to self-study, online activities, and online discussions, learners participate in a weekly tutorial session with fellow learners and the course tutor. This tutorial session does not involve lectures or classroom-style instruction. Instead, this is where learners get the chance to clarify doubts, pose questions, and apply their knowledge to their context. This is where they broaden their knowledge and apply the course material.

Learners: Learners range from first- to third-year learners. By the time they attend the tutorial, the learners will have completed online coursework, learning activities, and discussion forums. The recurring weekly tutorial session compliments their online learning experience.

Technology: Except for a few study centres or local centres, nearly all of the learning environment is online. Using conferencing applications, learners are brought together. We use Moodle announcements, emails, and backchannel networking applications to distribute the information.

To achieve full participation in online learning or blended learning, learning design should emphasise active engagement and authentic application. Incorporating problem-based scenarios, case studies, role-plays, and collaborative projects into the course or programme can further enable learners to partake actively in relevant and authentic contexts. The key element is to foster a learning design that promotes the self-directed and autonomous nature of the learner during the learning process (McLoughlin and Lee 2010: 33).

5.2.4 Community of Practice

The concept of socialisation or learning as participation in the social world emphasises that learning occurs through participation in communities of practice, in which learners engage in shared activities and interact with more knowledgeable members (Lave and Wenger 1991: 94). In online theological education, it is crucial to design a well-structured online learning environment, establish explicit participation guidelines, and foster a supportive online community.

A community of practice is a group of individuals who share a common interest or profession and who engage in regular interactions to share knowledge and experience (Wenger 1998).

Level: Level 3 of Bachelor of Theology.

Tasks: Learners must complete a collaborative assignment. If they are from the same study centre, learners can meet f2f; if the cohort is global, they are expected to use conferencing apps. Learners are expected to complete their assignments in a Google document and submit the link or share the document upon completion.

Learners: Learners are in their third year of study. At this point, they are accustomed to the TSA learning mode and the various technological tools necessary for this assignment.

Technology: They are required to use email/WhatsApp for communication, Google docs. for collaborative work, and Moodle for assignment submission.

Furthermore, in online theological education, a community of practice can be established through online discussion forums, social media groups, and virtual meetings.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavoured to demonstrate that learning is most effective when situated in the learner's context, particularly in the context of distance and online theological education. I have attempted to interface learning theory (situated learning), online learning (blended learning), and theological education (distance/online theological education) within the framework of a theological paradigm that recognises the significance of being contextually rooted. This was done by examining various learning modes, including synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, and different types of blended learning, within the context of some Asian and African institutional settings. The focus is on how these modes can be utilised by learners and course/curriculum designers to align with the learners' specific context. Furthermore, this is done by showing different types of learning activities that encompass the essential aspects of situated learning, such as activities that allow for participation in collective endeavours and authentic environments.

One advantage of the current effort is that it enables theological educators and/or course-curriculum designers to contemplate the possibility of incorporating diverse modes of online learning or utilising multiple types of learning activities to provide theological education or enhance the proficiency of theological educators. Furthermore, the numerous learning activities mentioned were being implemented in a f2f setting. Additionally, it is worth noting that the majority, if not all, of these activities can be readily adapted to suit the specific requirements of an institution's context. An area that warrants additional exploration is the implementation of

situated learning theory into one's own educational setting, with the aim of augmenting the learning experience for learners.

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