



Volume 3	Issue 1	July (2023)	DOI: 10.47540/ijqr.v3i1.961	Page: 104 – 114
----------	---------	-------------	-----------------------------	-----------------

## Non-Formal Education in Digital Spaces: A Digital Ethnography of Ghanaian Teachers' Use of WhatsApp Group

Richardson Addai-Mununkum

Department of Educational Foundations, University of Education, Ghana

**Corresponding Author:** Richardson Addai-Mununkum; Email: [ramununkum@uew.edu.gh](mailto:ramununkum@uew.edu.gh)

### ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:** Ethnography, Non-formal, Qualitative, Teachers.

*Received* : 11 June 2023

*Revised* : 29 July 2023

*Accepted* : 30 July 2023

### ABSTRACT

Research on social media use in education has found evidence of positive outcomes. While the benefits of social media in formal education discourse are known, there is still limited knowledge about its use in non-formal education. This study explored the use of WhatsApp groups in non-formal education. The researcher designed a qualitative virtual ethnographic study based on a community of Ghanaian teachers who utilized WhatsApp to prepare for their promotion examination. The researcher immersed himself as a participant observer in this digital community for 16 months, observing web interface, visuals, text, threaded discussions, and participant interaction. Data generated were analyzed thematically with the aid of Taguette, a qualitative data analysis software. The outcome of the study was an affirmation of limitless possibilities existing in digital spaces to promote non-formal education. Based on this, a recommendation is made for a reexamination of curriculum and pedagogical constructs to forge new directions for teaching and learning.

### INTRODUCTION

The promulgation of the SDGs has occasioned renewed efforts at providing inclusive equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities because it is believed to be the key to achieving all the other 16 goals (Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). Governments have been charged to invest in providing access to primary, secondary, and technical/vocational and higher education to increase the skill level of the youth and make them employable (Brunello & Wruuck, 2021; Debarliev, Janeska-Iliev, Stripeikis, & Zupan, 2022). While these efforts are commendable, it appears the focus has overly been on formal education to the downplay of non-formal education which might hold great promise. Studies on non-formal education programs have revealed that it has a huge potential in transmitting knowledge, skills, and values to individuals who commit to them (Latchem, 2018). Adams *et. al*, (2020) have argued that when utilized effectively, “non-formal education can be just as effective as, if not more effective than, the formal”.

Non-formal education (NFE) has been defined as the type of education that is institutionalized, intentional, and planned for providing addition, alternative, and/or complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016). Non-formal education in terms of features lies between formal and informal. It is the type of education organized for a particular group of people who require a specialized form of education (Debarliev *et al.*, 2022). It is often provided to guarantee the right of access to education for all and caters to people of all ages but does not necessarily apply a continuous pathway structure. In terms of structure, it may be short duration and/or low intensity, and it is typically provided in the form of short courses, workshops, or seminars (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2016).

Two key terms associated with non-formal education are structure and flexibility. In some ways, it is structured like formal education, yet it is flexible and not as rigid. Dib (1988) has described it as “an educative process endowed with flexible curricula and methodology, capable of adapting to

the needs and interests of students, for which time is not a pre-established factor, but is contingent upon the student's work pace". What this definition implies is that with non-formal education, time, place, and pace of work are flexibly determined and dependent on the student. Dib (1988) has argued that the relevance of NFE rests on "(a) - centralization of the process on the student, as to his previously identified needs and possibilities; and, (b) - the immediate usefulness of the education for the student's personal and professional growth".

A key feature of non-formal education is the opportunity for learners to learn from among themselves. Although the expertise of an instructor cannot be discounted in non-formal education, social interactions in the learning community and opportunities to learn from peers are very important factors in the success of students learning. Emerging scholarship in pedagogy has unearthed the concept of peeragogy to explain this phenomenon (Baharuddin & Setialaksana, 2023). "Peeragogy is about peers learning together, and teaching each other" (Rheingold, 2014). "Peeragogy is what people use to produce and apply knowledge together. The strength of peeragogy is its flexibility and scalability" (Corneli, Danoff, Pierce, Ricaurte, & MacDonald, 2016). Perhaps, this should not be seen as an emergent form of learning because "peer learning is probably as old as humanity itself" (Corneli et al., 2016). In this digital age, peeragogy has taken on new meaning and impetus with peers connecting effortlessly and disseminating knowledge so seamlessly.

Peeragogy as a concept is based on four key principles: (1) a worldwide population of self-motivated learners who use digital media to connect with each other, co-construct knowledge, and co-learn; (2) learning is a social, active, and ongoing process; (3) co-learning is ancient; the capacity for learning by imitation and more, to teach others what we know, is the essence of human culture; (4) we are human because we learn together with today's tools and some understanding of how to go about it, groups of self-directed learners can organize their courses online (EdTechReview, 2013 par. 3).

These principles are attuned to indigenous African education which relied on "active participation, direct observation, self-directed learning, learning in a group setting, peer learning,

imitation, role modeling, and expert instruction" (Nicholls, 1997).

Non-formal education (NFE) in the Ghanaian context has been more associated with the adult literacy program launched in the 1980s to improve the literacy levels of adults who could not benefit from formal education. Although its popularity appears to have waned in recent times, the Non-Formal Education Division of the Ministry of Education still exists as an icon of reference when people are asked about NFE (Amoah, 2019). In this paper, I argue that non-formal education is finding a new space in digital environments. Indeed, technological tools available today have occasioned the possibility of people in diverse places, connecting to co-learn. WhatsApp group is one such digital space.

Of all the social media platforms, WhatsApp is adjudged to be the fastest-growing in Africa and India (Baishya & Maheshwari, 2020). It was founded in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum, former employees of YAHOO, who sought to create a platform for people to communicate through a new form of texting, independent of phone network structures. From this start of text between two parties, WhatsApp has added new features such as video calls, and story sharing via status updates. Perhaps the most relevant for the discourse here is a feature called WhatsApp groups. This feature enables people to create groups that connect two up to 254 people to communicate among themselves. Although restrictions exist to regulate participants' actions, members can generally post messages, pictures, documents, and emoticons that are accessible to all the members of the group. WhatsApp has become an important tool in tertiary institutions in Ghana as nearly every student belongs to one or more diverse WhatsApp groups for classes, departments, faculty, religious groups, and hostels among others.

Research on social media use in education has found corroborative evidence of positive outcomes. Students in distance education programs have found social media fora as effective for their learning because of the opportunity they provide for the transmission of images (Cetinkaya, 2017). University students found the "integration of WhatsApp into their education to be easy, fun, and useful" (Gasaymeh, 2017). Among international distance, students, Madge et al (2019) reveal that

WhatsApp “opens up opportunities for IDE students “to transfer, translate and transform their educational journey when studying at a distance”. Besides academics, a study among postgraduate distance students in Zambia revealed that WhatsApp is a tool for learner support, and provides students with a sense of belonging whenever they felt alone (Simui et al., 2018). In the Ghanaian context, Afful and Akron (2020) caution that WhatsApp’s positive effect on the academic performance of students hinges on the condition that it is dominantly used for study-related purposes. Regardless of the positives, Al Abdullateef *et al’s* (2021) study of University students in Saudi Arabia during the Covid 19 pandemic found that WhatsApp for learning creates fatigue among learners because of the overload of information.

While we know of the benefits of social media, and WhatsApp in particular, to the educational discourse, there is limited knowledge about its use in non-formal education spaces. Scholarships reviewed are overly focused on using WhatsApp in formal education spaces and to some extent, informal education fora. The use of WhatsApp in non-formal education has obscured the view of scholarship leaving a yawning gap in its prevalence, usage, and benefits. More importantly, knowledge about concepts and principles used in digital spaces remains unknown because scholarship has shied away from them. It is the quest for answers to these questions that I embarked on this study.

The purpose of this qualitative digital ethnography was to explore the use of WhatsApp groups in non-formal education. It was undertaken to gain a nuanced understanding of how social media is utilized for educational gains. As a guiding question, I ask: How are WhatsApp groups being utilized as sites for non-formal education? In doing this, I paid unique attention to the peer interactivities happening in digital communities to unearth pedagogical principles and practices at play in digital community spaces.

This work draws on connectivism to theoretically provide a discursive framework. Connectivism originated from the works of George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2004, inspired by outcomes of connectivism conferences. As a theory, Connectivism describes knowledge and learning using digital technologies. “Connectivism discusses

how the internet, digital technologies, and networks have created a learning environment and sharing learning opportunities” (Chandrappa, 2018).

Connectivism operates within three domains of community, knowledge, and learning (Downes, 2020). Community is the group from which a network of interactions results in the creation of knowledge that is co-shared and co-learned. Knowledge is therefore something that is emergent, and results from interactivity rather than being the contents of it (Downes, 2020). Learning in connectivism is a process resulting from decision-making. In the words of Siemens: Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between important and unimportant information is vital. The ability to recognize when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made yesterday is also critical (Siemens, 2005).

The ability of members of a community to sift through tons of information and judge the credibility of knowledge forms makes learning worthwhile. This is because rapidly changing information implies that what is the right answer now, may be wrong tomorrow due to alterations in the information climate affecting the decision (Mlasi & Naidoo, 2018).

In this work, connectivism’s domains of community, knowledge, and learning are used as a lens through which happenings in the digital community are interpreted and meanings assigned. This will aid a nuanced understanding of learning in such environments not as individual human action, but as a collective mentality of a network of individuals (Downes, 2020).

Research on social media use in education has found evidence of positive outcomes. While the benefits of social media in formal education discourse are known, there is still limited knowledge about its use in non-formal education. This study aims to explore the use of WhatsApp groups in non-formal education. The researcher designed a qualitative virtual ethnographic study based on a community of Ghanaian teachers who utilized WhatsApp to prepare for their promotion examination.

## **METHODS**

I used a qualitative approach for this research, viewing reality as subjectively determined. Thus, knowing is not independent of the knower. A study about culture in a community, albeit digital, can best be studied experientially, interacting with individuals who experience the phenomenon, and describing such experiences (Coffey, 2018). Like Aspers and Corte (2019), I appreciate qualitative research as an iterative process in which an improved understanding of the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied. In this study about the digital community, I utilized qualitative research to immerse myself as a participant observer to be closer to the phenomenon, while I strived for an in-depth understanding of peer-learning opportunities in this community.

As a study of a cultural experience of a community, I designed this study as a virtual ethnography. Virtual ethnography is a type of ethnography utilized to study the culture of an online community (Bhattacharya, 2017). I chose this with the understanding that “the virtual space of the internet has its own cultures and sub-cultures, cultures that can be studied using an ethnographic approach” (Angelone, 2019). The virtual community of interest in this case was a WhatsApp group created to support the preparation of teachers due for promotion. I call this group the Teachers’ WhatsApp Community. This community was purposively selected because of its uniqueness in offering non-formal education. Although other WhatsApp groups exist for educational purposes, they are mostly associated with formal education. Teachers’ WhatsApp Community is made up of all adults, who are teachers and are due for a promotion exercise in the Ghana Education Service (GES).

As an ethnographic study, I immersed myself as a participant observer in this digital community for 16 months, observing “the web interface, visuals, text, threaded discussions, changes to the environment, and participant interaction” (Angelone, 2019). Soon after joining the page (as I later described in the results section) I sent a private message to the administrator to notify him of my research, requested permission, and sought the consent of members. After a couple of discussions over the phone, I made a post on the page that

contained information about this research and a request for their consent. I requested that members who were not willing to avail their posts for the study could mention so that their posts will not be utilized. Surprisingly nobody opted out given that their real identities were not obvious on the page. Thus, I did not stress convincing them of protecting their anonymity (Vuban & Eta, 2019).

Data generated in this study was mainly participants’ posts on the digital platform. I originally planned to use interviews in situations where clarification was needed but it was never utilized. A major challenge with virtual ethnography is that content on digital platforms can be removed or deleted. To surmount this, I adopted a strategy of archiving (McLeod & O’Connor, 2020). Using the export feature of WhatsApp, I exported the entire interaction on the WhatsApp page to an e-mail to be accessed if a disconnection occurs. Over the course of the study period, I had done six such exports, guaranteeing that no data was lost although I had to change my phone within the period.

A major challenge encountered was the enormity of data that was generated over the period. On average, 50 to 70 posts were made in a day (although some were repetitive) culminating in tons of textual and non-textual data that had to be managed. For this challenge, the qualitative data analysis software – Taguette was employed (as used by Tazijan, Bakar, Mohamed, & Ramli, 2021 in their study). The software permitted an upload of exported texts from where I read through the data severally to analyze content in the form of text, images, emoticons, and discourses. I created codes based on the theoretical lens and conceptual interests of the study. Codes like information, rules & regulations, lesson, content, sample question, leadership, and miseducation were created and used in tagging relevant portions of data within the software. An iterative process of recoding, alignment, and merging of codes resulted in the creation of themes. I then began a process of restoring, creating a narrative about the group in a way to make sense to readers.

An advantage of digital ethnography is the inherent mechanisms to guarantee the trustworthiness of the research. Given that all the data retrieved have been archived, there is no doubt about the dependability, credibility, and

confirmability of the research as every data is still accessible and verifiable. In providing a thick description of the digital community used in this study, I offer an opportunity for the transferability of the findings to similar contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, I recount my experiences as a participant observer of the digital community. As an ethnographer, I have *re-storied* experiences in a way that will make readers appreciate how this digital space is being utilized for non-formal education.

### The Teacher WhatsApp Community

This digital community was established on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2020 by two persons, a male called Kwadwo Mensah and a lady Naa Adjeley (pseudonyms). In a post to welcome members, Kwadwo described himself as a professional educator who is very experienced at providing tutorials for people who are readying themselves for GES promotion interviews. His post read in part:

*You may not know me, but I have helped a lot of people to pass their promotion interviews. You can check from the GNAT office in Accra and mention my name... (Kwadwo Mensah) (Page post, Jan 2020).*

He went along to introduce Naa Adjeley who she described as a veteran teacher and a teacher union leader. At this point, there were 45 members in the group but within a day, the number had moved up to 93. A week after I joined, the group had hit its limit of 245 members, but more potential members were waiting to join. Thus, Kwadwo created a second group to admit the others who wanted to join. Joining the Teachers' WhatsApp community was very simple. A friend could send your number to Kwadwo or Naa, who were the administrators, to add you to the group. Alternatively, the group's link could be shared, and a simple click on the link will grant you access to the page. It was therefore not a very closed group as anybody at all can join, except that if the purpose of the group was not of interest, people who join might soon leave as it happened a couple of times. Indeed, much as people joined daily, I also saw people leave occasionally because anytime someone left, a notice is posted "*xxxxxxxx (phone number) left*".

As a participant observer, I joined via a link that was shared on my course platform. As a teacher

educator, I have used WhatsApp groups to organize and support my classroom instruction. For this particular class group, most of them were teachers enrolled in a master's program so it was usual for people to post messages and links to issues that may concern members. The invitation post read:

*Are you due for GES promotion interview? Join this WhatsApp group and it will help you to prepare and pass.*

I followed the link to join because I was working on research about teacher promotions in general and felt it was a great opportunity to meet potential participants. Others might have joined for other purposes but for most members, they were teachers who were preparing for promotion interviews, and out of this common need, they came together to access and offer education. Clearly, this qualifies the activity here as non-formal education by Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) classic definition of NFE as:

*Any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population. (p. 34)*

Participants' comments like: "*I am very happy to be here;*" "*Thank you for creating this group*" showed their commitment to the purposes of the group and their interest in being part of this community. Soon after joining, Kwadwo posted rules and regulations of the group that I refer to as the eight commandments:

1. *We allow ONLY GES related posts.*
2. *If your post won't encourage, inspire, or motivate the vision of the group, don't post it.*
3. *If you have any observations of great concern, don't cause panic in the group. Inbox the admin.*
4. *No jokes, no links, and no adverts of ANY kind allowed here.*
5. *No religious and partisan political posts are allowed here.*
6. *Do not post misleading information cross check your facts before posting them.*
7. *Do not post nude videos and pictures.*
8. *No use of vulgar or derogatory words in this group (Page post, Jan 2020).*

The consequence for the breach of any of these was removal (expulsion) from the group. The rules appeared to have been largely followed but after a while, religious innuendos started without any warning or reprimand. On the first of April 2020, a member posted:

*Brethren, we thank Almighty God for giving us life in this difficult moment. The message for us is we should not forget the poor and needy in times like this. Proverbs 19:17 says "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD and he will repay him for his deeds"* (Page Post, Apr 2020).

Instead of condemnation and application of appropriate sanction, seven members responded "Amen." Nobody raised a query about the religious post. This is not too surprising because Africans and for that matter Ghanaians have been described as notoriously and incurably religious (Mbiti, 1969; Parrinder, 1970). Following from this episode, the floodgate was opened for the frequency of religious posts to increase. In fact, by two weeks, hymns and prayers were being posted daily but no queries were ever raised, suggesting that members of the community were not opposed to such posts. To the contrary, attempts by members to post advertisements came with a sharp reprimand from the administrator in statements such as: "*Member xxxx you are warned! These posts are not permitted here*".

### Lessons in the Community

Typical lessons on this digital platform took either the form of question and answer or notes. Periodically, leaders of the group will post notes on relevant topics for members to read and learn. For instance, on March 30, 2020, a leader posted some notes for members to read. An extract of the long notes read:

*History and Highlights of Educational Reforms Dating Back to Colonial Days. Introduction of castle Schools by the Europeans, around 1529. Meant to train children of colonial masters (i.e., molattoes) and children of some other important chiefs & wealthy merchants. Purpose: For communication to enhance their training businesses and evangelism (i.e., Interpretation of language, reading, writing, and numeracy)* (Group post 30th March 2020).

This post, like many others, was to provide information that was helpful for the teachers to learn for their examinations. In other instances, questions are posted for members to attempt to answer. An example of such questions is:

*What belief system is inquiry-based learning, in which learners generate their own knowledge through their experiences and teachers serve only as facilitators, based on?*

- a) behaviorism,*
- b) constructivism,*
- c) activism,*
- d) objectivism* (Group post 21st January 2020)

Members attempted to answer such questions and discussions were generated in response to (dis)agreements over the answer. Two significant happenings changed the focus and activities of the group. The first was the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Three months into the creation of this group, Covid-19 struck, and by March 16, schools had been closed. The announcement of the closures flooded the group page as members rushed to share the news and sought to compete over who shared it first. The news item: "*All schools closed down effective 16th March – Akufo Addo*" was shared so many times that I personally got irritated but restrained myself from commenting. For weeks, no learning happened on the page as members posted updates on Covid-19 and its consequences such as lockdowns and death rates.

The second significant episode was the change in the assessment form for teacher promotion. On 19<sup>th</sup> December, a member posted the outcome of a meeting between the Ghana Education Service and teacher unions. An extract of the releases read:

*New Promotion Process: (PS, AD II, AD I and DD) The GES has accepted the Report of Committee on the subject matter which has subsequently been approved by the GES Council. The New System of written tests will be used for Promotions in GES beginning with applicants who were last promoted on or before the year 2015/2016 involving 42,000 teaching and a little over 1,000 non-teaching staff. The written test will compose of 80 questions from an independent examining body as follows: 1. P/S, AD I & II – multiple choice & yes and no questions; 2. DD:- multiple choice, yes and no, and fill-in questions (in addition, they will subsequently*

*attend the interview for any other post, e.g., Head of School, etc. (with analogue ranks). Guidelines will be given regarding the areas. The names of the said Applicants will be advertised. Examination Centres will be in various Regions. The date will be communicated later (Group post 19th December 2020).*

This post came as a shocker to members as it triggered posts from members such as:

*Hmm, too bad, Test for old people like this? GES is not being fair to us, I am very disappointed in GES. I know this is just a ploy so they can do "kuluulu" to pass their favorites (Group post 19th December 2020). "Kuluulu is a local Ghanaian terminology for underhand dealings".*

Members were generally not happy with the change and were doubtful if the intent was genuine. Others were in support of the move as they recounted how the interviews had been too subjective and personal. Some narrated their experiences with hostile interview panels that resulted in their failure and argued the test is a better option. After a week, such arguments ceased, and members started asking for guidelines on the aptitude test. Private bloggers started sharing links to blogs where sample questions could be accessed. I followed one of such links but realized the questions were a collection of past questions from college courses.

After some weeks, Administrator Kwadwo Mensah came to allay fears and assured the community that he was working to get the guidelines, following which learning will resume on the platform. Truly lessons resumed some weeks later. From this period, the lessons were made up of multiple-choice questions that are posted, and members were requested to post their answers and explain. For instance, content posted on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021 read:

*When was the Continuation Schools instituted?*  
*(a) 1973*  
*(b) 1964*  
*(c) 1974*  
*(d) 1961 (Group post 21st Jan 2021)*

This was one of the 10 questions that were posted. Soon after the post, members started posting their answers. Some posted answer options for all

the questions whereas others posted for the ones they can answer. For instance, a member posted: "Number 1 is B 3 is D rather" because another member had suggested question 3's answer to be B. Occasional, debatable answers are subjected to analysis and members come to justify why they support the choice of an answer. From posts such as these, members peer-taught, peer-learned, and supported each other to prepare for the examination. This continued through the months.

### **Miseducation**

Perhaps the biggest challenge I noticed was the opportunity for the forum to be used for miseducation. Given that anybody can post on the page, there were instances where some less credible posts were made. For example, on April 2, 2020, a member posted what was supposed to be a content to be learned. The post read:

*Types of learning theories:*

- (1) Behaviorism*
- (2) Cognitivism*
- (3) Constructivism*
- (4) Humanism*
- (5) 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills (Group post, 2nd April 2020)*

Obviously, the inclusion of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills on this list of learning theories is very questionable. Even more worrying was the posting of content that was later found to be false. In one such instance, members were furious and responded harshly with these words:

*xxxxxxx: What's wrong with you guys?*  
*xxxxxxx: just forward anything without verifying*  
*xxxxxxx: So, what should we do with it? (Group post 11th March 2020)*

Although members consistently warned colleagues to verify their content before posting, it went largely ignored as less credible information was shared intermittently. The night before the exams, no lesson happened. Members devoted it to prayers and words of motivation, encouraging each other to be optimistic about their success. On the day of the exams, the page went quiet from morning till 5 pm when the exam was over. Kwadwo Mensah was fast to warn people to desist from discussing their examination questions on the platform because that could demoralize those who might have gotten parts of the answers wrong. This warning was generally heeded, as members turned

their feedback into thanks and appreciation for the presence of the group. The group went dormant for weeks as they awaited the release of results. In between, periodic false alarms were posted about the release of results. Members get apprehensive and anxious to ask questions and finally get to be told that the posts were not credible. For such roller-coaster experiences with false alarms, when the credible announcement of the release of results was posted on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2021, a lot of the members were skeptical as they posted:

*Not again! Please spare us wahala*

*This is 419; You people are causing fear and panic* (Group post 4th May 2021). “Wahala means trouble in Ghanaian local parlance. 419 means fraud in the local Ghanaian parlance”.

But it did not take long before others began to share:

*I'm through ooo; Uncle Kwadwo am through  
God bless all the administrators. I'm  
grateful; Many thanks to the administrators.*

*I'm successful*

*I'm grateful to the administrators.*

*I'm also successful. God bless them.*

(Group post 4th May 2021)

For others who could not hide their joy, they screenshot their feedback and shared it with the community to confirm the positive outcome received. Few of those who could not make it came out boldly to state they had failed and wondered if a new group will be created for the next exams. Members consoled such persons, and the administrators came in to assure them of supporting them for a second attempt. True to their words, a new group was created and a link to join was shared on the page weeks after the release of the results. Yes, a new community had been born and sadly, that was the end of my Teachers' WhatsApp Community's lifespan. As members exited the group page, I had no option than to exit quietly after my 16-month stay.

### **Peerogogy Connectivism, and the Teacher WhatsApp Community**

From this Teachers WhatsApp Community, we see peerogogy in action, manifesting connectivity domains of community, knowledge, and learning. Teacher WhatsApp Community was composed of self-motivated learners who utilized digital media to co-learn through social ongoing processes utilizing

a platform that today's technology affords (EdTechReview, 2013). Although Kwadwo Mensah and Naa Adjeley assumed leadership in this community, they always identified themselves as colleague teachers and thus peers. Everyone in this community joined voluntarily, evidence of their self-motivation to learn and share knowledge. Traditionally, such education would have been provided within an identifiable physical classroom space. What we observe here expands our understanding of non-formal education, breaking down barriers that perceived it as confined to a particular location. Non-formal education may be provided in digital spaces where distance is not a barrier and learners' coming together is not limited by their physical proximity to each other.

Bradshaw (2008) defines a community as “the networks of people tied together by solidarity, a shared identity and set of norms, that does not necessarily reside in a place”. Teachers' WhatsApp Community passes for a “post-place community” where geographical locality is not an impediment. As shared earlier, members had a common identity of being teachers who are due for promotion. They created for themselves a set of norms evidenced in the “eight commandments”, although its full operation was challenged. There was a sense of solidarity and we-feeling as people were comfortable laying bare their ignorance and seeking help from colleagues who knew. They shared their joys together when some passed their examinations and encouraged each other through the Covid 19 pandemic. Downes (2020) has argued that “the combination and allocation of group members should comply with the principle of voluntariness, with members of the group each taking on an equal role and performing that role independently” (p. 115/116). Members of the Teachers' WhatsApp community played their roles voluntarily as co-learners and co-teachers. Knowledge was shared freely among themselves, and the traditional roles of teacher and student were very fluid in this community.

Connectivism is again manifested in the knowledge that was shared in the Teachers' WhatsApp Community. Knowledge in connectivism is unpredictable, unstable, uncontrollable, and in continuous growth. This is an apt description of knowledge within this teacher community (Cabrero & Román, 2018). Knowledge



did not only emanate from one source, and it was not possible to predict where the next piece of knowledge was coming from. In as much as rules regulated what can be shared, it became uncontrollable at some point when religious and other posts began to emerge. Knowledge was unstable because posts were shared that were later disputed and/or discredited. We saw this happening many times with false notices of the release of results. Content shared was deemed authentic for a period before it is contradicted and/or updated. It was constantly changing.

Learning in this digital community is unlike traditional notions of learning associated with formal education. The non-formality of this education manifested in learning as a process of decision-making. "Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality" (Downes, 2020, p. 116). Owing to the fluidity of knowledge shared in this digital community, members had to make individual decisions about what to imbibe, assimilate or internalize. They had to decide whether to keep any content in the short-term or long-term memories. It is not too surprising then that some members flouted rules because they made personal decisions not to learn them. Parts of the learning in the community involved a measure of formative assessment where members were offered opportunities to answer questions that were posted. In all the instances, less than one-tenth of the members responded. I can infer that the others made choices not to learn through the suggested means. It is thus very possible that for some community members, no learning happened for them because there was no relatively permanent change in their knowledge and behavior. Regardless, others benefitted from this learning community. From the testimonies shared on the page after the release of the results, I have no doubt that members benefited from the learning that happened on the page. The impact of this community on the success of their promotion examination can therefore not be discounted.

## CONCLUSION

After a year and a half stay in the Teacher WhatsApp group community, I left with a sense of fulfillment because I could answer my lingering question of how such digital communities were

being utilized for non-formal education. As people posted to appreciate group leaders and members for their success in their promotion examinations, I did not doubt in my mind that some form of education had happened in the community. This did not happen by chance and not without obstacles. It took the initiative of a person to bring the entire community together. It is therefore imperative to learn that using digital means for learning requires an educator's purposeful action and direction. Unlike traditional physical education spaces, digital communities provide a level of anonymity to participants which affords disorderly conduct that may be difficult to regulate. Educators need to be mindful of this and make provisions to control such spaces and prevent them from becoming dysfunctional. Indeed, technology is providing a lot of possibilities than were imagined some decades ago. This calls for a rethink of traditional notions and understanding of concepts. With the pushback at physical barriers to interpersonal communications, limitless possibilities exist to reexamine curriculum and pedagogical constructs through research to unearth nuanced understanding, chart new courses in knowledge areas perceived to have reached dead-ends and forge new directions for teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, S., Farrelly, T., & Holland, J. (2020). Non-formal education for sustainable development: A case study of the 'children in the wilderness' eco-club programme in the Zambezi region. *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development*, 14(2), 117–139.
- Afful, B., & Akrong, R. (2020). WhatsApp and academic performance among undergraduate students in Ghana: Evidence from the University of Cape Coast. *Journal of Education for Business*, 95(5), 288–296.
- Al Abdullateef, H., Pasley, R., & Chesney, T. (2021). *Exploring the effect of using Whatsapp for education during Covid-19 on university students' performance: A technostress perspective*. Presented at the UK Academy for Information Systems Conference Proceedings 2021, London. London: AIS E-Library.
- Amoah, S. A. (2019). Situational Analysis of Labour Turn Out in the Ghanaian Education

- Sector: The Strides and Preferences. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 9(9), 491–507.
- Angelone, L. (2019). Virtual ethnography: The post possibilities of not being there. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 31(3).
- Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is Qualitative in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 42(2), 139–160.
- Baharuddin, F. R., & Setialaksana, W. (2023). Andragogy, Peeragogy, Heutagogy and Cybergogy Contribution on Self-Regulated Learning: A Structural Equation Model Approach. *International Journal of Instruction*, 16(3).
- Baishya, D., & Maheshwari, S. (2020). WhatsApp Groups in Academic Context: Exploring the Academic Uses of WhatsApp Groups among the Students. *Contemporary Educational Technology*, 11(1), 31–46.
- Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide*. Routledge.
- Bradshaw, T. K. (2008). The post-place community: Contributions to the debate about the definition of community. *Community Development*, 39(1), 5–16.
- Brunello, G., & Wruuck, P. (2021). Skill shortages and skill mismatch: A review of the literature. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 35(4), 1145–1167.
- Cabrero, R. S., & Román, Ó. C. (2018). Psychopedagogical predecessors of connectivism as a new paradigm of learning. *International Journal of Educational Excellence*, 4(2), 29–45.
- Cetinkaya, L. (2017). The impact of Whatsapp use on success in education process. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(7).
- Chandrappa, P. K. (2018). Connectivism as a learning theory for the digital age. *Adhyayan: A Journal of Management Sciences*, 8(01), 37–47.
- Coffey, A. (2018). *Doing ethnography* (Vol. 3). Sage.
- Coombs, P. H., & Ahmed, M. (1974). *Attacking rural poverty: How nonformal education can help*. London: International Council for Educational Development.
- Corneli, J., Danoff, C. J., Pierce, C., Ricaurte, P., & MacDonald, L. S. (2016). *The Peeragogy Handbook*. Chicago, IL./Somerville, MA.: PubDomEd/Pierce Press.
- Debarliev, S., Janeska-Iliev, A., Stripeikis, O., & Zupan, B. (2022). What can education bring to entrepreneurship? Formal versus non-formal education. *Journal of Small Business Management*, 60(1), 219–252.
- Dib, C. Z. (1988). Formal, non-formal and informal education: Concepts/applicability. *Comparative Networks in Physics Education*, 300–315. Oaxtepec, Mexico: American Institute of Physics.
- Downes, S. (2020). Recent work in connectivism. *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning*, 22(2), 113–132.
- EdTechReview, E. (2013). What is peeragogy? Retrieved January 22, 2022, from EdTechReview.
- Gasaymeh, A.-M. M. (2017). University students use of WhatsApp and their perceptions regarding its possible integration into their education. *Global Journal of Computer Science and Technology*.
- Latchem, C. (2018). Open and Distance Non-formal Education. In *Open and Distance Non-formal Education in Developing Countries* (pp. 11–17). Springer.
- Leicht, A., Heiss, J., & Byun, W. J. (2018). *Issues and trends in education for sustainable development* (Vol. 5). UNESCO publishing.
- Madge, C., Breines, M. R., Dalu, M. T. B., Gunter, A., Mittelmeier, J., Prinsloo, P., & Raghuram, P. (2019). WhatsApp use among African international distance education (IDE) students: Transferring, translating and transforming educational experiences. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(3), 267–282.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy* (2nd edition). Heinemann.
- McLeod, J., & O'Connor, K. (2020). Ethics, archives and data sharing in qualitative research. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(5), 523–535.
- Nicholls, R. W. (1997). Folk media: Indigenous learning systems and instructional methodology. *Folklore Forum*, 28(1), 49–82.

- Parrinder, E. G. (1970). *African Traditional Religion*. Greenwood Press.
- Rheingold, H. (2014). *The Peeragogy Handbook*. CiteSeer.
- Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2(1). Retrieved from <http://www.itdl.org/>
- Simui, F., Mwewa, G., Chota, A., Kakana, F., Mundende, K., Thompson, L., ... Namangala, B. (2018). "Whatsapp" as a learner support tool for distance education: Implications for policy and practice at university of Zambia. *Zambia ICT Journal*, 2(2), 36–44.
- Tazijan, F., Bakar, R. A., Mohamed, R., & Ramli, N. F. M. (2021). Reading Walls: Digital Social Readers. *International Conference on Sustainable Innovation Track Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICSIHES 2021)*, 51–54. Atlantis Press.
- UNESCO. (2017). *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning objectives*. Geneva - Switzerland: UNESCO.
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2016). Non-formal education. In *UIS Glossary*.
- Vuban, J. A., & Eta, E. A. (2019). Negotiating access to research sites and participants within an African context: The case of Cameroon. *Research Ethics*, 15(1), 1–23.