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Online action research in the Maldives amidst the Covid-19 pandemic: Unexpected challenges

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## Online action research in the Maldives amidst the Covid-19 pandemic: Unexpected challenges

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### Abstract

*The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected the field of teaching and educational research, requiring new changes to methodological tools in my research. My doctoral study examines Maldivian primary teachers' engagement with social studies pedagogies through reflection. The pandemic posed several complex data collection challenges which I experienced as a researcher. As a result of not being able to return to the Maldives from New Zealand to gather data, data methods were altered from Participatory action research (PAR) to form online action research (OAR). The data were gathered from four different teachers in Maldivian primary schools through an online questionnaire, online workshops, online reflective narrative texts and online interviews. Unexpected research challenges included (i) time zone differences, (ii) my own and participants' unfamiliarity with new methods of online data collection in the research, and (iii) challenges of maintaining good researcher rapport with participants. These research challenges contribute to an emerging understanding of the unexpected issues that researchers might face using an OAR approach.*

### Keywords

Pandemic; online methodological tools; online action research

### Introduction

I have been an educator for more than 20 years and my principal role was to educate and observe teachers at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the Faculty of Education at Maldives National University (MNU). My experience in the teaching field piqued my interest to question the Maldivian primary teachers' development of, and approaches to, social studies pedagogies through reflection. From this experience, I learned that active learning and inquiry-based approaches are seldomly used in Maldivian social studies classrooms. In reviewing the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (NIE, 2016) on their policy of how they support and facilitate quality education for social studies, I found the complexity of issues in the document. One issue is that the focus for learning as outlined in the NCF to achieve



knowledge, skills, values and attitudes is poorly implemented through pedagogical practices in primary classrooms due to teacher-centred learning. Maldivian researchers (Adam, 2015; Latheef & Gupta, 2007; Mariya, 2012; Mohamed, 2006; Shareef, 2010) have raised the issue of these traditional practices and exam-oriented teaching in classrooms. Hence, this opens opportunities for research related to social studies pedagogy.

My PhD research initially adopted a qualitative participatory action research (PAR) approach to helping Maldivian teachers reshape their teaching and pedagogical practices. PAR is utilised for this research because I want to work with the participants as a practitioner myself, to find evidence of approaches to social studies pedagogy. I planned to activate my data collection process in the Maldives; however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic's closure of borders and lockdowns in both New Zealand and the Maldives, I was compelled to change my data collection approach from PAR to online action research (OAR). In this article, I discuss unexpected online data collection challenges using remote tools from 2020 to 2021.

This article contains three main sections. The first section discusses the theoretical foundations of OAR, while the second and third sections focus on my reflections on the planning and implementation OAR challenges I faced as a researcher.

## **A background to OAR**

The term “action research” was first coined by the author named Kurt Lewin, who exemplified action research as the active participation of discussions followed by a group decision on how to proceed with the issue (Adelman, 1993). It is one of the many research approaches used by practitioners to find a solution to an issue in qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). This approach has also been used as a methodology in education to improve the curriculum, facilitate professional learning and design educational programmes (Tynan et al., 2008). Typically, action research in education is participative and collaborative due to the advantage of on-the-ground, iterative interactions between the researcher and the participants (Clark et al., 2020). Thus, action research is a research strategy that is combined with actions and participation in the field (Altrichter et al., 2002). With the advancement of communication technology, researchers can video conference and utilise digital tools to conduct online data collection using an OAR approach to overcome challenges such as financial and time restrictions, and geographical dispersion in the context of the research (Gray et al., 2020). The restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic have threatened doctoral researchers with the timelines of their study and have forced researchers to explore, understand and communicate by using digital online tools (Sah et al., 2020). Thus, the use of OAR appears to be growing, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic (Safta-zecheria et al., 2021). Therefore, I introduced OAR into my study to build an interconnection between the researcher and participants strengthened by the use of online tools.

## **Research in a pandemic: From PAR to OAR**

PAR is a research design that allows the researcher and participants to evaluate their work in partnership and systematically investigate their work, monitor the process, gather data, find ways to evaluate the process and generate evidence (Lawson et al., 2015). OAR is a method where the researcher and the participants take these ideas and work together remotely in a structured, iterative plan using online tools to find a solution for the research issue. My reflection in this section describes the significance of adjusting the shift from PAR to OAR during the pandemic and the experience of practising online data collection remotely.

The main aim of my research is to investigate how Maldivian primary teachers conceptualise social studies in the context of the Maldives National Curriculum and shape their social studies pedagogies through reflective practice. The participants in my research are government primary teachers who are

teaching social studies in selected Maldives schools. Initially, my data collection was planned to be held face to face in the Maldives setting. Nonetheless, several factors contributed to the shift of my research to OAR. These factors impact the overall research objectives and the timeline of my research. This study was originally proposed to engage participants in a physical collaborative professional learning environment to actively review their own social studies pedagogies through reflective practice. However, due to the spreading pandemic, I had to learn to adjust by virtually developing a collaborative network between the participants to share and reflect on social studies pedagogy. These factors also contributed to an extended duration of my research timeline which pushed back eight months of data collection.

As a researcher in a global pandemic, it was challenging to overcome the anxiety of the delay in my studies. However, I overcame this challenge by consulting with my supervisors to allow remotely based online data collection through online tools. At first, my supervisors had mixed feelings about this idea, until I was able to convince the significance of proceeding with my online data collection process. Their mixed feelings were mostly around the management of participants and methods of online data collection, technical snags and quality of the data possible through an OAR process. Some of the technical snags included poor internet connection within the Maldives, which led to audio issues and frozen screens during the workshop and interviews. Nevertheless, due to proposed measures of maintaining the quality of data collection, and ensuring authenticity and confidentiality, my supervisors supported me to commence my online data collection. Proposed measures of maintaining the quality of my data include ensuring participants' attention throughout the research, ensuring that the participants understand what is asked of them, and using online tools for video conferencing and online collaborative group tasks that the participants are more familiar with.

## **Aspects of unexpected online data collection challenges during a pandemic**

I categorised my reflection under two themes: bridging the gap and embracing the unfamiliarity.

### **Bridging the gap**

As a researcher, my connections and interactions with stakeholders and participants are significant to building effective research relationships. This involves developing communication skills necessary to reduce conflicts and strengthen relationships (Suter et al., 2009). Negotiations between my participants enabled me to overcome challenges in collecting online data remotely. My reflections in this section highlight the strategies that I applied with my participants to pursue OAR.

Bridging the gap between the participants and stakeholders of my research context with an eight-hour time difference was crucial and arduous. Nonetheless, increasing the number of initial participants from eight teachers to eleven was a strategy to improve the efficiency of my study as a reduction of participants at the end of online data collection was anticipated due to the pandemic. The use of an OAR approach was practicable as the schools in the Maldives were conducting online lessons underlining the possibility to bridge the gap between the researcher and participants. Ethical considerations were another challenge within my research as ensuring the anonymity of the participants' identities was done virtually. This was significant as keeping the anonymity of the participants in the research helps to protect their privacy so that the respondents can reveal information that cannot be identified to them (Allen, 2017). I ensured the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by keeping their information in password-protected files and all the research data can only be accessed by myself. Therefore, it was my responsibility to ensure that none of the participants would be harmed by participation in my study (Eynon et al., 2017). As these measures were negotiated accordingly, I submitted for ethical approval of my research, and it was approved without reservation.

Building rapport with participants is significant (Hooley et al., 2012), yet it was another challenge within my research. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) highlight building rapport online with the participants is different from establishing a relationship face to face. They further argue that technical snags can hinder rapport-building with the participants. This brings me to discuss the importance of bridging the gap between the participants through the issues surrounding digital collaboration and communication environments. These issues in my research included difficulty in achieving seamless virtual communication, delayed responses and feeling a sense of disconnectivity. These factors adversely contributed to building rapport between my participants virtually all the while experiencing a spreading pandemic. Nevertheless, being understanding, open and friendly with the participants progressively supported bridging the virtual gap (Hooley et al., 2012). Thus, I planned weekly check-ups on the participants to observe how far they were on their reflective narrative texts, and if they needed more time, I provided them with as much time as they required. I understood their difficulties amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and valued their time and effort for voluntarily participating in the research to encourage their involvement in the research. Furthermore, I created a safe space for the participants to hold honest discussions where the participants felt more relaxed to share their thoughts and ideas on social studies.

### Embracing the unfamiliarity

My data collection consisted of four online methods which involved an online survey, three online workshops, four online reflective narrative texts, and online semi-structured interviews. In the course of my data collection, it was significant to develop a range of knowledge about the use of online tools. Thus, I adapted to embrace the unfamiliarity of utilising online tools remotely by learning and seeking strategies to overcome these challenges.

A qualitative online survey represents a range of open-ended questions designed by a researcher based on the focus of the research (Braun et al., 2020). My initial online tool was Google Forms; however, it lacked satisfactory features for my online survey, such as forming complex online surveys, which compelled me to choose Qualtrics as the appropriate online tool for my research. However, learning about the features of Qualtrics was another challenge. The Qualtrics software enables the researcher to set up refined surveys, publish and collect the results efficiently (Barnhoorn et al., 2015). I overcame this challenge by learning about the software with trial-and-error attempts along with the feedback of my supervisors and by piloting the online survey questionnaire with three other primary teachers from the Maldives. This experience allowed me to observe any issues found in the questionnaire, the time taken to complete it and any further changes required. Similarly, reflective narrative texts involve the researcher and participants in an online platform setting such as Google Docs where the participants share their experiences and stories (Clandinin, 2019). This was a difficult challenge to overcome as the number of participants reduced from eleven to four, which was a significant participant dropout rate of 63% in my research. The reason for this attrition was mainly caused by the challenges of the pandemic to their health and wellbeing and their teacher workload. The lack of consistency in the number of participants negatively affected me to progress with the timeline of my research. However, maintaining continual communication through e-mail and Viber strengthened my researcher and participant relationship.

The Zoom application was frequently used to conduct online workshops and online interviews. Selecting Zoom as a video conferencing tool went through a rigorous process as there were a couple of choices to decide from, such as Google Meet and Microsoft Team. Google Meet was an application that all the participants were familiar with; however, it lacked satisfactory features such as breakout rooms for group tasks which was accommodated in Zoom. On the other hand, despite Microsoft Teams being better for online collaborative projects, none of the participants were familiar with Microsoft Teams. Thus, choosing Zoom as a video conferencing tool in my research depended on the participants'

familiarity and the satisfactory features needed to accomplish the objectives of my research. Thus, Zoom is a cost-effective alternative online tool that contributes to qualitative online workshops and online interviews remotely (Gray et al., 2020).

The OAR approach significantly reduced costs, such as airfares, equipment and refreshment expenses involved during my data collection. I refined my skills to use Zoom by participating in online Zoom workshops at the University of Waikato and through the Centre for Tertiary Teaching and Learning (CeTTL). While I emphasised that participants needed reliable internet connections, some of the participants had connectivity problems during online workshops and online interviews. I overcame this by beginning the Zoom meetings 15 minutes earlier so that we could fix any connection issues from both ends. Moreover, to avoid any connection issues from the participants' end, I endured talking to black screens with their video off, which affected maintaining rapport with the participants. This is because observing the non-verbal language of the participants is significant to building rapport to improve their ability to relate, engage and establish meaningful interactions (Phutela, 2015). Nevertheless, I tried to connect with the participants by using various facial expressions, varying the tone of my voice and using filler words such as "hmm", "yeah", and "uhm" as a strategy to engage the participants. Due to the participants' inexperience in using Zoom, it also challenged me to maintain the fixed duration of the online workshop and online interview while guiding them to use the features of Zoom and other collaborative online tools such as Google Jamboard and AWW board. Google Jamboard is a digital whiteboard that lets you easily collaborate interactively in real-time and AWW board is a web application with easy-to-use features for drawing, editing and collaboratively sharing ideas on the online whiteboard. At the end of the data collection, I presented certificates for voluntary participation to each participant who was involved in the research process to recognise their achievement.

### **From this point forward**

Using an OAR approach potentially reduces the time and financial constraints of undertaking research. Based on my reflection, despite the challenges of utilising an OAR, I believe that applying this approach in educational research following the ethical guidelines of the data collection can be a reliable approach. Reliable in the sense that following the ethical guidelines and taking the appropriate measures to maintain the quality of the data under a pandemic or non-pandemic circumstance can allow you to gather data for research through an OAR approach. From my experience, it was significant for me to undertake self-study on the digital tools used within my research and take proper measures to maintain the quality of the data by ensuring that all the participants were confident to use the digital tools within the research as well. Likewise, it is crucial to managing appropriately designed learning experiences as per participants' needs and situations, such as finding a suitable time to conduct online workshops, throughout the research. For a successful data collection using an OAR approach, it is important to recognise that participants are attentive throughout the data collection as in some circumstances the process of gathering online data can be a tedious challenge. Hence, solely depending on emails or keeping in contact through social media platforms such as Viber is inadequate when it comes to engaging the participants. Building a strong, effective rapport with the participants required me to understand and observe non-language expressions which were lacking in my online data collection due to technical snags. Nevertheless, I achieved the objectives of my research: to gather the voices of the participants on their social studies pedagogy and to understand their perspectives on teaching social studies as a subject. Thus, some of my experiences have contributed to new knowledge in this field while the others allowed me to build a constructive analysis of my findings for my literature.

Despite some limitations, this online data collection was done at an early stage by using digital online tools in the Maldives where the use of technology is not common for teachers, especially for educational purposes. A possible solution for future educational researchers who may consider using an OAR approach within their research is to identify the participants' familiarity with the digital tools used

within the research through an online survey before conducting the formal online data collection for time efficiency. Hence, utilising an OAR approach to conduct online data collection research remotely can be a reliable approach.

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