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INTEGRATING METACOGNITIVE SKILLS AND CONNECTIVIST PRINCIPLES IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract:
Metacognition, the awareness and control of one's own cognitive processes and mental functions, is an absolutely essential skill for students who are engaging in Open and Distance Education (ODE). In particular, in ODE environments, the need for self-regulation and autonomy is of utmost importance. On top of that, with the arrival of connectivism, a modern learning theory that focuses on the vital role that networks and technology play in the knowledge construction process, there emerges a fresh and new horizon. This helps to promote and support metacognitive development, specifically within ODEs. This article discusses the intersections between metacognition and connectivism, putting into light how digital tools, networked communities, and artificial intelligence might support learners in planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning. This study will use empirical evidence and theoretical insights to propose strategies for integrating metacognitive practices with the principles of connectivism to enhance learning outcomes in ODE.

Keywords: metacognition, connectivism, open and distance learning

1. Introduction

Open and Distance Education (ODE) has dramatically changed the landscape of higher education in terms of accessibility and flexibility, particularly for non-traditional students who often have multiple commitments and varied life circumstances. This group of learners can engage with their studies on an asynchronous basis and manage their studying in a schedule tailored to their individual lifestyles and across different geographical settings, making education more accessible than ever before. This new pedagogical approach brings with it a number of important benefits, most importantly the critical ability to tailor educational experiences to meet the individual needs, preferences, and learning styles of every student. However, this model also presents certain challenges that need to be taken into account. Foremost among these challenges

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are those related to social isolation, which can be brought about by reduced face-to-face interactions, a lack of immediate support from instructors that can delay feedback and assistance, as well as the high demands for self-discipline that need a strong internal drive and motivation among learners to keep them going and to complete their courses effectively (Amiti, 2020).

Within this dynamic learning environment, the concept of metacognition emerges as an important element in effecting successful learning. First coined by Flavell in 1976, metacognition describes a person's heightened awareness and control of their cognitive processes and strategies. It is the complex process of identifying the individual's unique strengths and weaknesses, understanding the various components embedded within the tasks and knowing the appropriate strategies that need to be employed to bring about relevant learning experiences. The metacognitive skills play a large role in an independent, self-regulated environment where learners in Open and Distance Education (ODE) acquire competency in the planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes related to their educational progression and performance. This, consequently, promotes autonomy, resilience, and the ability to adapt in students as they progress through their educational experiences (Bueno & Rodas, 2021); (Karagianni, 2024).

Concurrently, the connectivist learning framework affords new and insightful perspectives on the complex educational challenges facing both teachers and students in today's world. Developed by prominent theorists Siemens and Downes in the early 2000s, connectivism primarily views knowledge as a networked entity that is inherently distributed across a wide variety of technological and human networks. This conceptual model postulates that in the rapidly changing digital age, the ability to effectively connect with various sources of information and communicate with collaborators on numerous networks has become an essential and crucial aspect of the learning cycle. The extensive plan fits well with ODE, offering multiple conducive opportunities to harness the full potential of modern technology and, concurrently, community networking opportunities for the betterment of every constituency involved in the learning process (Goldie, 2016; Herlo, 2017; Hendricks, 2019).

2. Metacognition in Open and Distance Education (ODE)

Metacognition is the ability of students to monitor and guide their cognitive activities effectively—skills that become particularly important when the situations are highly autonomy requiring, as Open and Distance Education (ODE) is. This kind of monitoring can be concretely classified into two critical aspects: metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive knowledge refers to one's awareness of the nature of one's competencies and deficiencies, the specific requirements of the tasks they happen to be performing, as well as the strategic techniques that can be brought into play to manage effectively these tasks. This basic knowledge enables students to adapt and adjust their own learning strategies to their own strengths and needs of the specific tasks, a skill becoming ever more critical in situations where direct guidance by the teachers

may not be forthcoming. The complex processes, through which students guide their own learning, are collectively known as metacognitive regulation (Jr *et al.*, 2020) (Yen, 2020). Metacognitive regulation comes about when learners are aware of and reflect on cognitive activities.

It comprises three basic components: planning, monitoring, and evaluation. In the context of ODE, effective planning may go beyond simply creating clear and specific learning outcomes to organizing resources in a structured manner and timetabling study sessions, for which tools such as digital calendars and state-of-the-art AI-driven platforms can be used to a great extent in realizing these important tasks. The term monitoring refers to the continuous assessment of a student's knowledge and progress concerning pre-established goals. Students can achieve this by using digital tools like interactive dashboards and formative quizzes, which will encourage self-assessment and help to identify specific areas that need further study. It includes the overall assessment of the effectiveness of all the strategies put into place, including revising those methods when necessary—for instance, from passive reading to actively developing concept maps in cases where there is a wide gap in understanding (Johnson & Davies, 2014); (Pérez, 2018); (Alvarez *et al.*, 2022). No matter how important it is in the practice of education, fostering metacognitive skills in the area of online distance education (ODE) brings forward several unique and challenging issues that have to be faced by educators. This online learning environment can make students feel a sense of isolation, which will significantly increase their individual responsibility to manage their own progress and can also deepen their feelings of being overwhelmed by the demands of their course work.

Furthermore, the resources that are abundant in the ODE are usually spread out, which makes the process of finding out what specific materials will suitably serve the educational needs and purposes of the students cumbersome. Moreover, given that the technological infrastructure of ODE requires students to effectively adapt their traditional metacognitive skills to suit the complexities of digital spaces, this adaptation could be substantial challenges for many learners. Therefore, it is important that educational institutions should reflect on these complex challenges and proactively implement effective strategies that can facilitate the improvement of metacognitive skills in students participating in online learning (Filcher & Miller, 2000); (Martínez, 2012); (Zhu & Bonk, 2019); (Gueta & Janer, 2021).

3. Strategies to Foster Metacognition in ODE

For fostering the metacognitive development of students, educational institutions are obliged to systematically integrate various reflective practices into their curricula. The integration may involve encouraging students to use e-portfolios where they regularly document their learning experiences and track their development over time, which significantly raises their awareness of their thinking processes and learning behaviours affecting their education. Moreover, reflective journals are a valuable resource to

motivate students to engage in self-assessment and continually adjust their learning strategies, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of their personal development and progression as learners (Kuiper, 2002; Mair, 2012; Ramadhanti *et al.*, 2020). Another very beneficial approach that can be adopted by both educators and institutions involves the incorporation of learning analytics into educational practices.

By means of the proficient use of artificial intelligence-based tools and technologies, learners are capable of obtaining prompt and targeted feedback on numerous facets, including the duration dedicated to specific assignments, their extent of engagement in cooperative endeavours, and their understanding of the subject content. This valuable data not only helps students identify exact areas that need improvement, but it also actively engages them in crucial metacognitive practices that will enhance the overall learning experience. In addition, the automated insight generated from learning analytics persuades students to reflect systematically on their educational journey and hence provides a way towards better learning outcomes and higher academic achievement (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016); (Freitas *et al.*, 2017); (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Highly interactive tools—such as gamified systems and well-developed simulations—can effectively motivate learners to apply the basic metacognitive strategies more flexibly in a variety of engaging contexts.

These high-tech tools not only provide immediate feedback on performance but also force learners to reflect and adjust their strategy in real time, which strongly enhances their overall ability to employ metacognitive skills in different situations. Moreover, teachers have the ability to offer systematic training courses focusing on transferring these necessary skills, such as goal setting, effective time management, and critical thinking, to better prepare learners for the constantly evolving demands of Open and Distance Education—ODE—(Buckley & Doyle, 2016; Oliveira *et al.*, 2022; Rocha *et al.*, 2024).

4. Connectivism in Open and Distance Education

Connectivism proposes that knowledge is constructed complexly by associations that our brains make with diverse information sources, co-learners, and specialists in multiple fields. This educational paradigm has emerged as an intentional response to the pervasive and powerful influence of digital technologies upon modern learning contexts and paradigms. In the context of Open and Distance Education (ODE), the theory of connectivism is of special importance and has unique advantages, as it fosters learning through a wide range of diverse resource networks and collaborative communities. This revolutionary theory outlines several key characteristics, such as the compelling idea that knowledge is stored in distributed networks and is constantly updated and recreated in real time (AlDahdouh *et al.*, 2015); (Banihashem & Aliabadi, 2017); (Kiv *et al.*, 2020).

In this connectivist view of education, the process of learning is greatly improved through the creation of dynamic, adaptive networks in which learners interact actively with their peers and with experts in a collaborative way in developing and expanding

their knowledge base. This perspective represents a considerable challenge to the traditional, static content typically associated with more classical learning spaces, as students have now been empowered to access modern and, in some cases, real-time knowledge resources that represent the latest developments within their fields of research. For instance, students can access niche blogs and receive real-time updates on industry trends from social media platforms, enabling them to maintain a current and well-informed understanding of their respective fields of study, thus helping to further enhance and deepen their overall learning experience (Alam, 2023).

Moreover, connectivism significantly underscores the essential function of technology as a vital facilitator in the development and sustenance of complex interconnected relationships between learners and resources. Instruments like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), dynamic discussion forums, and advanced AI-enhanced systems notably promote the effortless creation of various knowledge networks that address the requirements of contemporary learners. These revolutionary platforms not only allow students to learn through deep engagement and heavy interaction with both the content and their peers, but they also support improved and immersive learning experiences that go way beyond traditional pedagogical practices. By strategically using such powerful digital tools, the learners are able to collaborate among themselves effectively and co-regulate their individual learning processes in order to adjust to the fluid and ever-changing educational environment characteristic of ODE contexts (Ravenscroft, 2011); (Staubitz *et al.*, 2015).

5. Challenges of Connectivism in ODE

Despite the many benefits that connectivism brings to the area of online distance education (ODE), it also poses certain challenges that need to be well managed in these learning environments. The problems of information overload have, in modern society, been one of the most frequently occurring issues, since with the huge availability of a vast number of resources, learners may easily feel confused by such information and become so overwhelmed that it ultimately decreases the overall efficiency in learning new things. Within this context, the ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information becomes a skill that can be very challenging for many people. Educational institutions can go a long way in making this task easier by being very selective in resources used and providing comprehensive training to students in effective information literacy methods (Gunaratne *et al.*, 2020); (Feroz *et al.*, 2022); (Mukhlis *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, the digital divide is another major barrier that reinforces the already existing inequalities in access to education; unequal access to technology and reliable internet connectivity leaves learners from disadvantaged backgrounds seriously at a great disadvantage and consequently greatly hinders their meaningful use and active participation in online distance education.

This significant disparity inevitably exacerbates the pre-existing disparities in educational achievement and accessibility that have troubled numerous communities for

an extended period. As has been stated, this can be a very serious problem, and educational institutions will take various steps to eliminate it: easily accessible offline versions, mobile-friendly platforms with sensitivity to the differential levels of accessibility faced by different demographic student cohorts (Romanova *et al.*, 2020); (Gu, 2021); (Werfhorst *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, the significant lack of personal interaction, which is often attenuated to a degree by a variety of different digital connections and platforms, can lead to deep feelings of isolation and disengagement among learners that may be hard to overcome. The reduced physical presence of both peers and instructors in ODE settings can significantly lower levels of motivation, which may translate into a disturbing increase in dropout rates that raises concern about the effectiveness of these educational models.

In order to address this burning issue appropriately, there is a need for the intentional integration of advanced technologies that allow for real-time engagements, including virtual office hours and live collaboration sessions in an effort to create a more engaging and supportive environment for all concerned parties to be part of the learning experience at all times (Gillett, 2017); (Nyysti & Walters, 2018); (Brainard *et al.*, 2024).

6. Empirical Evidence on Metacognition and Connectivism

Empirical research conducted in a variety of educational settings in recent years has consistently flagged the critical and transformative impact that metacognitive strategies, combined with connectivist principles, have on drastically improving the overall learning experiences of ODE students. Empirical evidence gathered in numerous studies conclusively shows that students who deliberately and efficiently use metacognitive tools—be that through advanced self-monitoring dashboards or various reflective practices—will have significantly higher course completion rates compared to their peers who do not engage in such methodologies. It is only through the regular and systematic tracking of their learning progress, accompanied by perceptive and personalized feedback generated by advanced artificial intelligence technologies, that these students become much better equipped to confidently manage their unique learning paths. Such a process enables them to transcend a myriad of challenges and obstacles that are inherently built into the very fabric of ODE environments (Neroni *et al.*, 2019). Comprehensive and in-depth studies focused directly on the tenets of connectivism provide some compelling and significant evidence of their ability to not only markedly enhance collective regulation and cooperation amongst students but also, most importantly, promote the critical thinking skills whose absence prevents academic achievement at present in the modern knowledge seeking environment.

Active participation in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which are characterized by diverse resources and ample networking opportunities, has been shown to significantly improve learners' general knowledge and engagement with the course materials through multiple interactions with peers and collaborative learning activities that foster deeper collaboration. These pioneering platforms serve an essential and critical

function in empowering learners to establish strong, significant, and interrelated knowledge networks that can substantially improve a deeper level of understanding and pragmatic application of the subject area, which in turn leads to better learning outcomes (Chatti *et al.*, 2010); (Almatrafi & Johri, 2018). Furthermore, the purposeful and strategic integration of artificial intelligence is a fundamental and significant factor that effectively interweaves the concepts of metacognition and connectivism within the constantly evolving spectrum of online learning. AI-powered systems, with advanced algorithms at their core, can execute the function of supplying customized feedback and creating highly dynamic learning pathways that dramatically maximize effective self-regulation through enhanced networked learning for diverse learners.

Empirical research emerging from various studies has demonstrated that students who actively use these sophisticated AI tools often show improved academic performance on a consistent basis. This can be explained by the fact that these intricate systems have been particularly designed to tailor learning conditions to fit the individual needs of every learner. In the meantime, these tools foster broader educational connections and nurture meaningful interactions among students in cyberspace (Cho, 2022); (Jin *et al.*, 2023).

7. Practical Implications for Educators and Institutions

Educators can enormously help the practical application of metacognitive and connectivist principles by adopting a wide range of innovative strategies that would enhance the overall learning experience. One such powerful approach is the inclusion of reflective activities in the curriculum, which would encourage learners to reflect on their understanding while at the same time allowing them to change their learning strategies based on new educational needs. Moreover, participation in network-oriented tasks, including peer evaluations and cooperative projects, can greatly contribute to the advancement of profound learning, as these activities promote the exchange of knowledge and a variety of experiences among students. By using adaptive content delivery systems characterized by their flexibility and responsiveness, educators can tailor educational experiences to fit the unique needs and preferences of each learner, increasing their personal engagement and intrinsic motivation (Campenhout, 2020). Additionally, educational institutions should invest in building up solid infrastructures of support, which will be able to help integrate such progressive frameworks of learning in an effective manner.

This calls for significant financial investments in the creation of AI-driven learning analytics that can identify students who are at risk of falling behind, enabling educational institutions to provide them with immediate assistance and personalized educational paths that meet their individual needs. In addition, developing comprehensive learning management systems, which are seamlessly integrated with tools for self-reflection and collaborative learning, can greatly enhance the overall learning experience, making it more cohesive and efficient. Institutions must adopt proactive measures to ensure equal

access to the necessary technology by addressing the problems of the digital divide through either affordable internet connection projects or offline learning resources targeting marginalized groups (Na & Tasir, 2017); (Yilmaz & Yilmaz, 2022). Looking into the future, emerging technologies in augmented and virtual reality hold great promise in offering immersive learning experiences that can significantly enhance both metacognitive and connectivist learning in the realm of ODE. The potential of AI-driven personalization and blockchain technologies for secure credentialing and reflection will further innovate how learners engage with content and develop networks of knowledge. Through the intentional and effective integration of these emerging technologies, ODE has the potential to make educational access and the quality of learning experiences globally more accessible and of better quality than ever before (Murtaza *et al.*, 2022); (Zumbach *et al.*, 2022); (Lin *et al.*, 2023); (Castro *et al.*, 2024).

8. Conclusion

The thoughtful and deliberate integration of metacognitive skills, on top of the underlying principles of connectivism, has a very relevant role in the wide realm of Open and Distance Education. This creates a framework that is very strong and effective, which not only raises learner engagement to significantly high levels but also actively supports deeper levels of autonomy among students. In the final analysis, this well-structured integration contributes meaningfully to their overall success in various educational pursuits. By leveraging a wide range of innovative digital tools and fostering vibrant, interconnected, networked communities, Open and Distance Education has the remarkable ability to provide personalized and dynamically adaptable learning experiences. The experiences are tailor-made to meet and serve the diverse, unique, and ever-evolving needs of today's contemporary learners. This careful and thoughtful integration of both the theoretical underpinnings that buttress educational practices and the practical applications that can be leveraged in real-world settings gives rise to valuable insights that are not only informative but also actionable by educators and educational institutions alike.

These insights provide a compass for all those who are working to optimize educational outcomes within environments that are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. Ultimately, this strategic integration of theory and practice holds the promise of further democratizing education in many profound ways. By so doing, it empowers all learners, regardless of their background, to grow and thrive in an interlinked world that is replete with information, opportunities, and disparate resources at their fingertips (Mattar, 2018); (Melezhik *et al.*, 2021); (Jeny, 2024).

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflict of interests

About the Author(s)

Georgia Karagianni studied English Language and literature at the University of Athens and later specialised in areas such as educational psychology, intercultural education, counselling, teaching Greek as a foreign language, curriculum design, content development, etc. She holds two postgraduate diplomas, "New Forms of Education and Learning" and "Language Education for Refugees and Migrants". She is a PhD candidate in the field of Open and Distance Education at the Hellenic Open University. She has worked as an English language teacher at both levels of education for 14 years and served as Head of Educational Affairs at the Karditsa Department of Secondary Education. Since April 2023, she has been serving as an Education Counsellor for the first and second level education of Trikala & Karditsa prefectures. She has participated in presentations at international conferences, has written articles in international journals and is the author of three books on teacher training, social-emotional learning and inclusion. You can read her published articles at Academia.edu (link).

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