

The Dilemma of Online Education in Building Student Character

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of character education in online learning and its impact on students' moral development through a systematic literature review. It analyzes theoretical frameworks, challenges, and strategies from peer-reviewed articles, books, and credible sources to address ethical issues in digital learning environments. The research identifies key challenges, including reduced teacher-student interactions, limited opportunities for moral reflection, and insufficient real-world practice of ethical behaviors. These challenges undermine critical dimensions of character education—moral knowledge, emotional engagement, and moral action—resulting in fragmented moral development. The findings highlight that online education often lacks the depth of interaction necessary for students to observe, reflect on, and practice moral values. However, it also reveals opportunities to leverage technology for character education. Interactive tools, such as moral simulations, value-based applications, and collaborative online projects, can enhance students' understanding and application of ethical principles. Teachers remain central to this process, serving as moral role models and facilitators of reflective discussions. The study emphasizes the need for teacher training to adapt pedagogical strategies for digital platforms and maintain emotional engagement with students. Furthermore, the research underscores the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities to strengthen character education in online contexts. Practical recommendations include developing teacher competencies in technology-based character education, fostering family involvement, and designing educational technologies that promote ethical behavior. This study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive framework for integrating moral and character education into online learning, ensuring it remains a priority in the digital age.

Keywords: Educational Dilemma; Building Character; Student Morals

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, education faces a complex challenge: integrating technology into learning processes while maintaining the fundamental goal of character and moral development. Online education, which has become increasingly prevalent due to advancements in technology and pandemic-driven necessity, offers new opportunities for learning but also presents significant ethical and developmental concerns. Students' increasing engagement with social media and digital platforms often distracts them from academic and moral pursuits, contributing to potential moral decline and social issues. The prevalence of online education raises questions about its effectiveness in fostering ethical values such as integrity, honesty, and responsibility, which are essential for personal and societal well-being (Martínez et al., 2020).

The shift to online education has introduced ethical challenges, including heightened risks of plagiarism, cheating, and improper use of digital resources. These challenges underline the need for strategies to ensure that online education goes beyond knowledge transfer to instill values of ethical conduct and respect (Chang & Chou, 2015). Current research suggests that ethics and character education can be integrated into online curricula through moral dilemma discussions, critical thinking exercises, and fostering collaborative and respectful digital environments (Astutik & Adwitiya, 2020; Aslani, 2013). Despite these suggestions, the question remains: how can online education effectively address the moral and character development of students when direct, real-world interactions are limited?

Studies have highlighted that effective character education requires a holistic and integrated approach, incorporating modeling, habituation, and the internalization of moral values (Nitte & Bulu, 2020). Such approaches allow students to cognitively understand, emotionally appreciate, and practically apply ethical principles in daily life (Fathurohman, 2019). However, there is little empirical evidence on the success of these methods in online learning environments, where teacher-student interaction and experiential learning are inherently constrained.

Moreover, while some research has explored the potential of digital tools such as video platforms, discussion forums, and virtual mentoring (Sulastri et al., 2020; Yuliani & Saputri, 2021), there is a lack of comprehensive strategies to address these challenges systematically. For example, how can teachers balance the use of digital tools with the moral and emotional development of students? What role should families and communities play in reinforcing character education outside the digital classroom?

This article addresses these gaps by critically analyzing the effectiveness of online education in fostering students' moral and character development. It examines innovative pedagogical strategies, including the use of technology-based learning media, curriculum redesign, teacher training, and family involvement, to enhance moral education in digital contexts. By addressing these issues, this article seeks to provide actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers to navigate the challenges and opportunities of character education in the digital era.

The study highlights the urgent need to rethink educational approaches to ensure that online learning supports not only intellectual development but also moral and ethical growth. This contribution is particularly critical in preparing students to act as responsible, empathetic, and ethical individuals in an increasingly technology-driven world.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a literature review to explore the integration of character education in online learning and its role in promoting students' moral development. It systematically reviews scholarly works to uncover theoretical frameworks, challenges, and strategies related to the subject. The research involved targeted searches within academic databases to identify peer-reviewed articles, books, and credible sources addressing online learning, character education, and moral values. The analysis synthesizes insights into tackling ethical challenges in digital learning environments, such as plagiarism and reduced teacher-student interaction, through structured character education initiatives.

This approach lays the groundwork for understanding strategies that educators and institutions can adopt to incorporate ethical and moral development into online learning. It also highlights gaps in current research, paving the way for future studies on character education in digital contexts.

DISCUSSION

The Dilemma of Online Education in Shaping Student Character

Online education has become an important part of the modern education system, especially in pandemic situations and physical limitations. However, this study found that online education brings significant challenges in building student character, which is traditionally instilled through direct interaction and real experiences in schools. This finding reinforces Lickona's (2019) view that character learning requires active engagement from students in social situations to understand, feel, and practice moral values.

Online learning often does not provide enough space for in-depth discussion or personal reflection, which are essential components of character education. In an online environment, limited interaction deprives students of the opportunity to learn from the behaviors and values modeled by the teacher. Previous research by Narvaez and Lapsley (2009) showed that effective character education requires direct interaction that allows students to observe and imitate moral behavior in real contexts.

The online learning phenomenon affects the main dimensions of character education, namely moral knowledge, feelings, and actions. Moral knowledge becomes less effective when students are not engaged in discussions that stimulate critical thinking about ethical values. In addition, emotional engagement, which is important for building empathy and a sense of responsibility, is also reduced in online environments. These findings are in line with Ledbetter's (2017) study, which revealed that digital interactions often reduce the quality of interpersonal relationships and limit students' emotional development.

On moral action, the limited real-life experience in online education gives students less opportunity to practice values such as cooperation, responsibility, and discipline. This corroborates Koh's (2012) theory on moral development, which emphasizes that students' moral actions develop through direct experience and active engagement in social communities.

Teacher's Role in Online Character Education

Teachers still play a central role in building student character, even in an online environment. As moral role models, teachers face great challenges in conveying moral values when direct interaction is not possible. This research suggests that teachers need to adopt innovative approaches, such as utilizing technology to create moral value-based simulations or facilitating reflective discussions through digital platforms. This finding is supported by Suryono et al.'s study (2023), which highlights the importance of teacher training in using technology to strengthen emotional connections with students in online learning.

However, the role of teachers cannot fully replace the real-life experiences needed in character education. Therefore, teachers need to ensure that the personal element in online learning is maintained, such as through individualized interaction and reinforcement of moral values in each learning session.

Online education also changes the dynamics of family involvement in character education. Parents have a greater role in supervising and guiding their children, but this study

notes that not all parents have the ability or time to carry out this role effectively. In this context, Epstein (2001) emphasizes the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities in supporting character education.

School communities also have the challenge of creating value-based activities in an online environment. However, this study found that community-based activities, such as online collaborative projects or virtual social activities, can be an effective alternative for building students' cooperation, empathy, and responsibility.

Utilizing Technology for Character Education

While online education brings challenges, this study also found that technology offers great opportunities to support character learning. With the right design, technology can be used to create interactive and meaningful learning experiences. An example is a moral value-based educational app designed to engage students in ethical simulations or interactive stories. This is in line with Sahin & Anagun's (2018) research, which shows that technology can improve students' understanding of moral values through interesting and relevant media.

Technology can also be used to build cooperation skills through online projects that involve collaboration between students from different backgrounds (Aydogan, 2024). This approach not only teaches values such as responsibility and cooperation but also helps students understand the importance of effective communication in achieving a common goal.

This research makes an important contribution to the character education literature by shedding light on the specific challenges faced in online education. The findings reinforce previous theories and research, as suggested by Arianti (2019) that students' learning environment strongly influences character development. By identifying challenges and opportunities in online education, this research provides a framework that can be used to design character education strategies that are more adaptive to the digital era.

This research offers several practical recommendations to overcome the dilemma of online education in building student character: first, Strengthening Teacher Competence: Teachers need to be trained in using technology to support character learning, including creating interactive and meaningful learning experiences; second, Collaboration with Families: Schools need to involve families in the character education process by providing guidance and support for parents; third, Character-Based Technology Development:

Technology should be designed to support character learning, such as through moral value-based apps or online collaboration platforms.

The dilemma of online education in building student character reflects the complexity of the modern world of education. However, with an innovative and collaborative approach, these challenges can be turned into opportunities to create a younger generation that is not only intellectually savvy but also moral and responsible. Collaboration between teachers, families, and communities is key to ensuring that character education remains a priority in the education system, even in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the complex challenges and opportunities in integrating character education within online learning. Online education, while essential in the modern era, particularly during periods of physical restrictions, often lacks the interactive and experiential elements critical for fostering moral knowledge, emotional engagement, and ethical actions. Limited teacher-student interactions and reduced opportunities for reflection hinder the development of essential character traits such as empathy, responsibility, and cooperation.

Despite these challenges, the study highlights the pivotal role of teachers as moral role models and the potential of technology to enhance character education. Teachers must adapt by using technology to create engaging and reflective learning experiences, while families and communities play a more significant role in guiding students' moral development. Collaboration among these stakeholders is essential to address the gaps left by the online learning format.

Technology offers promising solutions, such as moral simulations, interactive storytelling, and collaborative online projects, which can effectively support character development. By integrating these tools into educational practices, online learning can transform into a platform that not only delivers knowledge but also builds moral responsibility. This research provides a practical framework for addressing the dilemmas of character education in digital environments, emphasizing innovation, collaboration, and adaptability. By leveraging these strategies, online education can continue to prioritize character building, ensuring students grow as ethical and responsible individuals in an increasingly digitalized world.

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