

**Overcoming Ethical Challenges in Online Education:
A case study of Moodle Classes in the English Department at
Khemis Miliana University**

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Received: 15/09/2025 Accepted: 17/10/2025 Published: 15/12/2025

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the ethical challenges faced by teachers in virtual classes and attempts to suggest effective measures to overcome them. As E-learning becomes an indispensable choice in higher education in Algeria, teachers face a set of ethical considerations as to virtual classroom management, online assessment and evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Data was collected using two methods: Interviews with teachers and class observations. The case study is a British Civilization class on Moodle Platform in the Department of English at Khemis Miliana University, Algeria. The study findings reveal that online education faces challenges related to the features of the technological tool, the ethical code of conduct, and the digital literacy skills of teachers and learners. These are influenced by technological, social and pedagogical factors. To face these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is recommended. Training teachers and learners on the use of online education platforms, plagiarism checking tools, and developing ethical guidelines on the platform are among the proactive measures that need to be taken to overcome ethical challenges and promote the outcomes online education.

Keywords: assessment; ethical challenges; Moodle platform; online education; virtual class.

Introduction:

Online education in Algerian Higher Education assumed an increasing importance since the COVID-19 crisis. The spread of the pandemic and its consequent confinement measures made virtual classes the only option to maintain education. Yet, even after the crisis was over, online learning is still adopted and maintained as it offers greater access to education and new opportunities for learning (Balida, 2023). However, ethical challenges arose in online teaching and learning. This case study examines the ethical challenges faced by teachers in a virtual British Civilization class on Moodle platform at Khemis Miliana University, Algeria. The challenges were identified through class observations and the perspectives of teachers on them were explored through interviews. This study thus, aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of ethics in online education and provide recommendations to overcome its challenges.

I. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The increasing popularity of online education created a heating debate among teachers and education specialists as to the ethical challenges it caused. Online education raises concerns about equity of access, privacy and intellectual property (Kumar, 2024). Confidentiality, bullying and harassment have also emerged as paramount concerns (Pitt, 2016). These challenges can hinder the teaching-learning process and reduce the effectiveness of online education.

Accordingly, developing ethical practices in virtual classes becomes a necessity. This case study comes within the endeavour to maximize the benefits of online education and minimize its risks and ethical challenges. By exploring the experiences and perspectives of teachers, the study attempts to reveal the ethical issues in virtual classes and provide insights into the effective measures to deal with them.

I.1- Research Questions and Objectives

The study is guided by two research questions: What are the ethical challenges presented by online education? And what are the practical measures to overcome them?

To answer these questions, the study set the following objectives:

- Identifying the ethical issues faces in virtual classes.

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- Examining teachers' perspectives on ethics in online education.
- Recommending practical measures to make online teaching and learning more effective.

I.2- Significance and Relevance of the Study

Virtual classes are the space where technology and education converge. This convergence has brought about many benefits and opportunities. Yet, despite of its transformative potential, online education is associated with many ethical responsibilities. The issues of assessment validity, intellectual property, and access equity need to be addressed.

This study explores the ethical dimensions that shape the experience of online education. It attempts to scrutinize the ethical challenges faced in the digital educational landscape and provide strategies to address them. Through an in-depth observation and analysis of the ethical considerations in a digital class, the study contributes to the understanding of how the challenges raised by integrating technology in education and the effective ways of dealing with them. It is particularly relevant to the current debates in education resulting from the necessity to shift the educational landscape from the physical classroom to virtual spaces.

Moreover, the study adds to the existing literature on ethics in online education. As this becomes a pressing issue in this digital era, many studies were conducted to explore the ways of maintaining ethical conduct in virtual classes. Yet, the focus in most studies was on primary, middle and secondary school settings. This study thus attempts to shed light on online education in higher education. It expands the research efforts to the era of university training and seeks to set the foundation for further research works in the field.

I.3- Structure of the Study

The present study commences with an introduction that sets the scope and relevance of the study. Then, a literature review is provided to give an overview of existing knowledge in the field. The methodology section provides the case study design, data collection methods and data analysis procedures. The findings are

revealed and examined with reference to the current literature. The study concludes with suggestions and recommendations to address ethical challenges in online education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers in the field of online education have identified many ethical challenges related to the digital mode of instruction. As to the ethical issues related to students, Bušíková and Melicheríková say that online education increases the possibility of academic fraud (2013). Pajpai states that students may opt for plagiarism when preparing digital content (2022). He also maintains that discipline issue can be raised as some learners tend to neglect the code of conduct in virtual settings. Aldosemani draws attention to the patterns of interaction between teachers and learners in online classes (2020). She states that even in virtual classes, the two parts of the educational process should be active participants and should by no means lose interaction or neglect its ethical codes.

Similarly, other studies have highlighted the ethical challenges faced by teachers when giving online classes or providing online assessment. Balida (2023) points out that “online students may engage in unethical behaviour such as cheating on exams and sharing answers with peers”. This in its turn can lead to the spread of academic dishonesty as teachers may give fake grades that do not reflect the level of their learners.

In the context of higher education in Algeria, education specialists voiced concerns about the integration of online teaching in Algerian universities. Zeraoulia and Arar (2024) questioned the validity of the strategies implemented by teachers to provide online formative assessment. They stress the need for employing the correct assessment strategies to ensure a fair and valid evaluation of learning outcomes in virtual settings. Bentaleb (2021) revealed that some teachers are not accustomed to online learning platforms and thus faced hurdles to deliver their courses using them. She also identified the lack of ICT tools and unequal internet access as other main obstacles to online education.

Other researchers have also explored the ethical challenges related to educational policy. Bellatrache and Aloutti (2020) claim that Algerian higher education institutions could not establish e-learning because of various challenges that prevent e-readiness access.” Bouhouali (2023) attributes this to the lack of

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effectiveness due to the absence of the required infrastructure and the lack of the necessary technological devices. Djouiba (2024) identifies other challenges in the context of Algerian primary education. He states that “challenges like biases, privacy concerns, and the need for reliable data must be addressed.” Most studies thus, agree that the integration of E-learning in the Algerian educational system is not without consequences. Researchers emphasized the need for addressing the ethical issues related to online education to provide better and more secure learning environment for Algerian learners.

Despite the increasing academic interest to the field of online education and the growing body of the literature related to it, there are several gaps in the literature that create a need for further research. First, most studies focused on the ethical challenges faced by learners while the perspectives of teachers received less academic attention. Second, there was a clear focus in the literature on online education in primary, middle and secondary schools. The context of higher education was consequently not sufficiently addressed. Third, most studies highlighted the ethical challenges without proving practical solutions to overcome them.

The current study thus aims to build on these previous research works with a particular focus on online education in Algerian higher education. By examining the use of Moodle platform in delivering virtual classes, the study highlights the major ethical challenges faced by Algerian educators and attempts to provide effective measures to promote ethical behaviour in virtual contexts.

III. METHODOLOGY

III.1- Description of the Case Study Approach

The study adopts the case study approach to explore the ethical challenges faced by educators in online classes in the context of Algerian higher education. The selected virtual class was a British Civilization class on Moodle platform. Besides, multiple interviews were conducted with the teachers delivering this online content and additional data was collected through class observations.

The case study approach is used because it enables the collection of rich data. “The case study approach to gather rich

and detailed data on the experiences and perspectives of the participants in the virtual class and to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data.” (Balida, 2022). Accordingly, it can give in-depth insights to the virtual class and enable a better understanding of the nature of the ethical concerns related to it.

III.2- Description of the Virtual Class and the Participants

Bigné (2018) defines a virtual class as “the provision of education to students who are separated by distance and in which the pedagogical material is planned and prepared by educational institutions.” It uses different tools of interaction such as Learning Management Systems (LMS) and video conferencing software. In Algerian universities, Moodle is adopted as the official platform to deliver online classes. Moodle refers to Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment. It is “a software package for producing internet-based courses and websites.” (Dharmendra & Buttan, 2011).

Following the 2022 curriculum reform, both teachers and students in all Algerian higher education institutions faced the necessity of engaging in virtual classes as part of a larger curriculum. Thus, in English Departments, teachers in charge of subjects that fall within the discovery or transversal units like foreign languages, civilization, translation and entrepreneurship had to shift from an in-person to an online teaching mode. Learners also had to access course materials in the online subjects, submit assignments, and receive feedback from teachers using online tools.

The study selected the British Civilization course on Moodle platform as a case study. This choice was informed by teachers’ perspectives. Teachers of this subject voiced ethical concerns related to learners understanding of the material, academic honesty in doing assignments, and the validity of online assessment methods.

III.3- Data Collection Methods and Procedures

Data collection in the current study relied on two methods: Observation and interviews. A semi-structured interview was conducted with four teachers of British Civilization in the English Department at Khemis Miliana University. In-person interviews were conducted in private settings. The interviewees were informed of the purpose of this study. They also signed consent forms in

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which they agreed on the publication of the data they provided. The identities of the teachers were kept anonymous. They were referred to in the findings section using hyphenated numbers.

Observations were conducted during class time. Teachers in charge of the classes provided online access via Moodle to enable the observation of how virtual classes were conducted, the teacher-learner interaction pattern, the tools used to provide feedback and assessment, and the ethical challenges that emerged during the virtual class.

III.4- Data Analysis Techniques

To identify the key ethical challenges faced in online education, a thematic analysis was used. The steps of thematic analysis were: collecting initial data using interviews and class observation, reviewing the data to identify recurrent themes, reporting the patterns of themes, and analyzing the themes with reference to the framework of the study.

After transcribing the interviews, the key ethical challenges voiced by teachers were identified and organized into categories that include similar concepts. Examples from the interviews were provided through quotes to illustrate the teachers' perspectives on the ethical challenges they faced in their virtual classes. Then, the relationship between these challenges was explored. This provided insights that enabled the suggestion of practical measures that need to be taken to overcome these challenges.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

IV.1- Presentation of the Key Themes

<i>Classroom Management:</i>	<i>-Large class size - Cuts in connectivity during class-time</i>
<i>Academic Fraud:</i>	<i>- Compromising Academic Integrity -Cheating in exams and assignments</i>
<i>Ineffective Assessment:</i>	<i>-Difficulties in providing feedback on assignments -Grades that do not reflect the actual level of learners</i>
<i>Unethical Behaviour:</i>	<i>-Inappropriate interactions/ speech/ gestures -Unintentional breaches of professional codes of conduct</i>

Table 1: Key Themes Representing Ethical Challenges in Virtual Classes

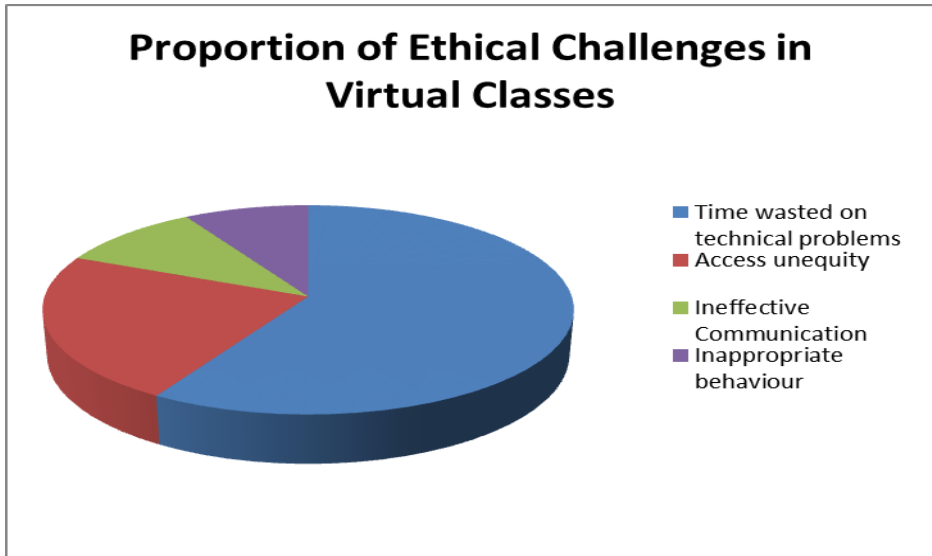


Figure 1: Presentations of the Proportion of Ethical Challenges in Class Observation

IV.2- Discussion of the Findings

Table 01 outlines the key categories of ethical challenges faced by the teachers of British Civilization in their virtual classes in the English Department at Khemis Miliana University. The four categories highlight the major ethical issues that hinder the effectiveness on online classes. The findings of the interviews revealed that the majority of teachers faced challenges related to the management of virtual classes. Moodle platform amplifies challenges related to the large size of the classroom.

Teachers find it difficult to address the individual needs of learners or to monitor their participation and allow them equal time to talk or ask questions. Teacher-01 said: “Due to the large number of first year students, I cannot provide all of them enough time to participate. This makes me feel somehow guilty because I cannot give shy or slow learners the attention they need to make progress.” Another teachers voiced concerns related to distraction in virtual classes and the difficulty of retaining students’ attention during class time. She says: “As British Civilization is a subject that requires serious attention, I struggle to keep my learners engaged

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during the whole session. They are most of the time distracted especially by the end of the session.”

The second major ethical issue faced by teachers is compromising academic integrity. Teachers believed that in online education, it becomes easier for learners to engage in dishonest practices like sharing answers, plagiarism and cheating. Teacher-03 says: “My learners do their assignments using AI-assisted technologies, like ChatGPT. I cannot do anything about it because we are not provided free access to plagiarism checking tools.” Maintaining academic honesty becomes a serious challenge in online education as many learners opt for the easiest ways to do their assignments. Besides, teachers cannot even ensure that the assignment was completed by the enrolled students themselves and not by others.

These dishonest practices and academic fraud undermine the fairness of assessment. Assessing learners’ progress or assimilation of the content delivered becomes more challenging in virtual settings. Teacher-04 expressed worries about the reliability of the grades provided in online modules. He says: “I can guarantee that almost all the grades do not reflect the learners’ real level. Since we cannot make sure that the assignment is done by the learner and not plagiarized from another source, it is hard to talk about fair assessment and academic honesty.” These concerns voiced by teachers represent a challenges not only effective assessment and grading but even to the core values of teaching and learning. Academic fraud thus touches the reliability of the academic degrees provided to learners.

Virtual classrooms also witness breaches of the ethical codes of conduct. These may sometimes result from teachers’ or learners’ unintentional actions. Yet, teachers said that there are many incidents in which some participants made inappropriate comments, most of the time thinking that their cameras or mikes were off. These comments were mainly about the bad network, their inability to hear the instructor’s voice due to network cuts, interruptions made by classmates, or the extended class-time resulting from these network cuts and interruptions. Teacher-05 says that even if she always tries to set professional boundaries and avoids dealing with

learners unprofessionally both in onsite and virtual classes, the breaches of the ethical code of conduct from the part of some learners persist. Incidents of bullying or verbal abuse were not reported by teachers. All the interviewees reported that an atmosphere of mutual respect prevails between the teacher and the learners. The inappropriate comments were thought to be private; they not meant to be heard.

The pie chart presents the ethical challenges encountered in the observed virtual class. The challenges are segmented into four categories. The largest portion (in blue) represents the challenge of the time wasted on technical problems. This means that technical difficulties significantly affect virtual classes. The technical issues noted in the observed class were: platform glitches, weak internet connectivity, and hardware malfunctions. These issues, on their turn, resulted in access inequities. Access inequity (in red) represents the second largest segment. It highlights disparities among learners to access the required platform and remain connected all along class-time. The digital divide can be attributed to the economic differences between learners and the inability of some learners to afford high internet connectivity or high quality hardware.

Interruptions in internet connectivity consequently lead to ineffective communication. The smaller segment (in green) represents the challenges encountered by teachers and learners to maintain effective and fruitful communication during class-time. This was noticed mainly after audio-delays. Other major causes of ineffective communication were the absence of non-verbal communication, distractions in the home environment, and the difficulties related to the subject matter (historical and civilizational terminology). The smallest portion of the pie-chart (in purple) represents the challenges related to maintaining good ethical conduct in the virtual class. Few incidents of inappropriate comments were noticed. This can be explained by the fact that some learners feel that a virtual class in an unprofessional setting. Thus, their interaction pattern becomes friendly.

IV.3- Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the

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study focused on a single virtual class, in one setting, and using a given online education platform. Thus, the findings may not be generalized to all virtual classes.

Second, the choice of the case study might also have influenced the findings of the study. Some of the challenges encountered in a British Civilization class such as difficulties in understanding the historical terminology or challenges related to the mode of assessment might be different if virtual classes in other subjects were examined.

Third, the study examined the ethical challenges encountered by teachers in online education. This implies that the data collected might be subject to response bias. Different findings could have been obtained if the perspective of learners was reported in the study.

To address these limitations, larger-scale studies can be undertaken to consider different virtual classes and explore the perspectives of teachers, learners and even policy makers or education specialists. Multiple data collection methods can be used to ensure the reliability and generalizability of the data. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ethical challenges related to online education and lead to deeper insights when suggesting solutions to overcome them.

Conclusion:

Through a qualitative examination of the ethical challenges encountered by teachers in online education, the study finds out that these challenges were the result of a complex interplay between technological, social and pedagogical factors. The study highlights ethical challenges related to academic honesty, access equity, ineffective assessment, and breaches of the ethical code of conduct during class-time. The study also identifies some factors that can promote ethics in online education such as affording the required technological tools, varying the methods of evaluation and setting clear regulations as to the professional code of conduct in virtual classes.

The study aimed to make a contribution to the existing literature on online education though identifying the ethical challenges in virtual classes and suggesting practical measures to overcome them.

In the context of Higher Education in Algeria, the study provided insights into the difficulties that hinder a successful online education experience such as overcrowded classes, the full schedule of teachers and learners, and the lack of the required technological tools. These difficulties resulted in many ethical challenges. The dominance of technical issues and access inequities underscores the importance of infrastructure and accessibility in ensuring smooth virtual learning experiences. While ineffective communication and inappropriate behaviour are less prominent challenges, they still highlight areas for pedagogical improvements. Compromising academic integrity and ineffective assessment methods highlight the need for better online class management and evaluation strategies.

To mitigate the ethical challenges faced by educators in online education, the following measures are suggested. First and for most, there is a need to provide plagiarism detection software and clear guidelines on citation and referencing in all institutions of higher education in Algeria. Second, to ensure effective assessment, there is a need for varying the evaluation modes. This can be achieved through giving grades on oral presentations and participation in group discussions. To minimize the breaches of the professional code of conduct, there is a need for providing clear guidelines at the beginning of each semester on the ethical code of behaviour and setting sanctions for violators. Furthermore, addressing technical issues and improving equitable access should be prioritized. Solutions might also include offering training on virtual tools, providing better access to devices, and ensuring reliable internet connectivity.

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