

Bridging the Gap: The Institutionalization of Reflective Practices in ODL Teacher Education in Tanzania

Raphael Tumaini O'maitarya

Lecturer, Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania, rafaeltumaini@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines how reflective practices (RPs) are integrated within open and distance learning (ODL) pre-service teacher education in Tanzania, focusing on the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). Despite strong policy endorsement of learner-centered pedagogy, little empirical evidence exists on how reflection is enacted in ODL environments characterized by asynchronous interaction, limited supervision, and uneven digital access. Using a concurrent mixed-methods design, data were collected from second-year student teachers (n = 120) and institutional tutors (n = 8) through surveys, interviews, virtual observations, and curriculum analysis. Findings reveal that while RPs such as e-portfolios, peer feedback, journaling, and action research are formally present, their implementation is structurally fragmented and weakly institutionalized. Tutor commitment and student teachers' engagement are evident; however, limited digital pedagogical training, inconsistent assessment frameworks, and inadequate institutional guidance constrain reflective depth, often reducing reflection to task completion rather than professional inquiry. The study argues that the challenge in Tanzanian ODL teacher education is not the absence of reflective practices but their under-institutionalization within curriculum, supervision, and assessment systems. These findings provide context-sensitive evidence for strengthening policy operationalization, tutor capacity, and structured reflective mechanisms in distance-based teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Open and Distance Learning, Pre-service Teacher Education, Digital Pedagogy, Tanzania

Introduction

The global expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has fundamentally restructured teacher preparation, yet it has simultaneously created a "pedagogical friction" in the cultivation of reflective practice (RP) (Pitsoe and Maila, 2011). While reflection is widely recognized as a cornerstone of professional teacher identity (Cant, et al, 2013; Dewey, 1933; Artzt & Armour-Thomas, 2002), its enactment within ODL remains an under-theorized and structurally neglected domain. In many Global South contexts, including Tanzania, ODL is no longer a peripheral alternative but a primary vehicle for addressing teacher shortages.

However, shifting teacher preparation into virtual spaces does not merely change the location of learning; it fundamentally disrupts the relational and supervisory mechanisms essential for deep, transformative reflection (Dhiman, 2021).

The ODL Disruptor: Why Reflection is at Risk

Reflective practice is traditionally viewed as a disciplined inquiry that bridges the gap between theory and classroom action (Dewey, 1933; Blomberg, 2018). In conventional face-to-face programs, this process is nurtured through real-time dialogue and immediate mentorship, which acts as a catalyst for professional growth (Ellegaard et al., 2017). Conversely, ODL environments are characterized by asynchronous interactions, limited direct supervision, and a heavy reliance on digital mediation. These conditions shift the burden of reflection entirely onto the student teacher. As Delic and Becirovic (2016) note, without deliberate scaffolding, reflective practices risk becoming descriptive and superficial. In the absence of the "interpersonal mirror" provided by a physically present tutor, reflective tools such as journals and portfolios may degrade into performative, "tick-box" exercises rather than meaningful professional inquiry (Astika, 2014).

The Tanzanian Context: A Policy-Practice Paradox

Tanzania provides a critical case study for this global challenge. Through flagship institutions like the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), the nation has aggressively integrated ODL into its teacher education policy. Yet, a stark paradox exists: while national policies emphasize learner-centered, reflective pedagogy, the institutional reality reveals a "structural fragmentation." Research by Anangisye (2011) highlights that the promotion of professional ethics and reflective standards often faces significant implementation challenges in Tanzanian teacher colleges. Furthermore, Dachi (2016) argues that teacher professional development in Tanzania has historically suffered from "missing dimensions," where the depth of pedagogical reflection is sacrificed for the sake of enrollment expansion and administrative compliance.

The Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the proliferation of ODL, empirical evidence remains thin on how reflection is actually *enacted* within the specific digital constraints of the Global South. While international studies offer a comparative look at RP (Ewing et al., 2021), there is a void in understanding how reflective pedagogy survives the transition to distance modes in contexts with uneven digital access and limited tutor capacity.

This study addresses this gap by moving beyond a description of "what" tools are used to investigate "how" (and why) reflection is being integrated, or marginalized, within the ODL lifecycle at IAE and OUT. The analysis of the intersection of curriculum design, tutor facilitation, and student teachers' engagement, makes this research identify the specific institutional "bottlenecks" that constrain professional growth. In doing so, it contributes context-sensitive

evidence required to move from a fragmented model of reflection to a robust, institutionalized system of professional inquiry in distance-based teacher education.

Literature Review

Reflective practice (RP) has long been recognized as a cornerstone of teacher education, supporting professional learning through critical examination of teaching experiences, beliefs, and actions (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983). In traditional face-to-face teacher education, reflective activities are often embedded within classroom interaction, school-based practicum supervision, and immediate feedback from mentors. However, the rapid expansion of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has altered the conditions under which reflection occurs, raising important questions about how reflective practices are designed, enacted, and assessed in virtual and flexible learning environments. This shift is not merely contextual but epistemic, as ODL reshapes the pedagogical, technological, and relational foundations of teacher learning.

Reflective Practice in ODL Teacher Education

In ODL contexts, reflective practice is increasingly mediated through digital technologies, asynchronous interaction, and limited physical contact between tutors and student teachers. Online journals, e-portfolios, peer discussion forums, and digital self-assessment tools have become primary mechanisms through which reflection is encouraged (Moon, 2006; Boulton & Hramiak, 2012). While these tools offer flexibility and scalability, studies suggest that reflection in ODL environments is often less structured, less dialogic, and more individualized than in campus-based programs (Kabilan & Khan, 2012; Loughran, 2019). As a result, reflective activities risk becoming procedural tasks rather than critical inquiries into professional practice.

Research from diverse ODL systems indicates that the effectiveness of reflective practices depends not only on the availability of digital tools but also on pedagogical design, tutor competence in online facilitation, and institutional assessment frameworks (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Without deliberate scaffolding and feedback, student teachers may engage superficially with reflective tasks, reproducing descriptive accounts rather than analytical or transformative reflection.

Why ODL Changes the Nature of Reflection

Unlike face-to-face teacher education, ODL relies heavily on asynchronous learning, mediated communication, and learner autonomy. These features fundamentally reshape reflective practice in three ways. First, the absence of real-time interaction limits opportunities for spontaneous dialogue, modelling of reflective thinking, and immediate corrective feedback. Second, digital platforms mediate reflective expression, privileging written or recorded formats that may not align with students' prior learning cultures. Third, assessment in ODL often emphasizes completion and submission over iterative reflection and professional dialogue.'

Consequently, reflective practice in ODL requires intentional design that integrates technology, pedagogy, and assessment. Studies show that when tutors actively guide reflection through structured prompts, formative feedback, and peer interaction, student teachers demonstrate deeper levels of critical reflection and professional awareness (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Kearney et al., 2020). Conversely, where tutors lack training in digital pedagogy or reflective assessment, reflective tools remain underutilized or inconsistently applied.

Empirical Evidence from ODL Contexts

International research consistently highlights both the potential and limitations of reflective practices in ODL teacher education. Studies from Europe, North America, and Asia report that digital reflective tools can enhance self-regulation, professional identity formation, and theory–practice integration when embedded within coherent instructional designs (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 2013; Zeichner & Liston, 2014). However, these benefits are unevenly realized, particularly in contexts characterized by limited technological infrastructure, high tutor workloads, and weak institutional support.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, ODL teacher education programs face additional challenges, including unequal access to digital resources, limited exposure to reflective pedagogies, and assessment cultures that prioritize summative evaluation over formative learning (Unwin, 2019). Existing studies tend to focus on access and enrollment expansion, with comparatively little empirical attention given to how reflective practices are enacted in everyday ODL teaching and supervision. This gap is particularly evident in teacher education systems where ODL serves as a primary pathway for training large numbers of teachers.

Reflective Practices in Tanzanian ODL Teacher Education

In Tanzania, institutions such as the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) play a central role in teacher preparation through ODL. National policy documents emphasize learner-centered pedagogy, professional competence, and continuous teacher development. Nevertheless, evidence suggests a disconnect between policy intentions and actual pedagogical practices within ODL programs. Reflective activities are often mentioned in curricula but remain weakly integrated into teaching, learning, and assessment processes.

Previous studies in the Tanzanian context have highlighted challenges related to tutors' preparedness for online teaching, inconsistent use of digital platforms, and limited mechanisms for monitoring reflective engagement among student teachers. Cultural norms that position tutors as authoritative knowledge providers may further constrain dialogic and critical reflection, particularly in virtual environments where interaction is already limited. At the same time, emerging practices such as online journaling, portfolio-based assessment, and virtual peer feedback indicate growing awareness of the value of reflection for professional learning in ODL teacher education.

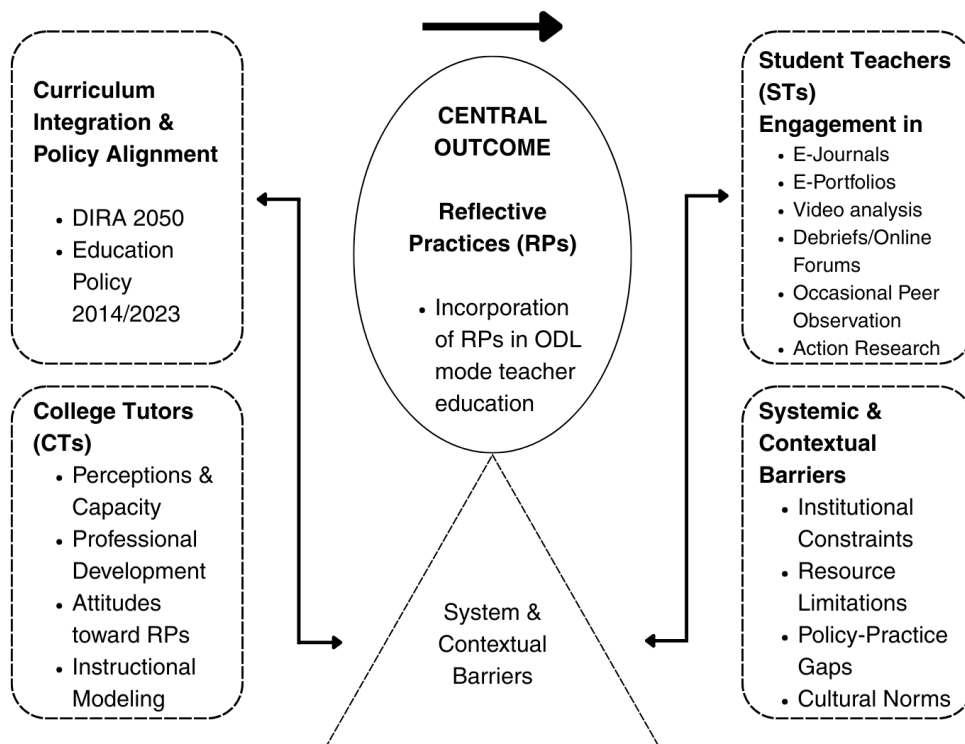
Conceptual, Theoretical and Analytical Framework

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study (see Figure 1) posits that the successful incorporation of reflective practices (RPs) is not an isolated pedagogical event but a central outcome emergent from the dynamic interplay of four critical pillars: policy alignment, tutor capacity, student engagement, and systemic mediators.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework



Policy & Curricular Alignment: This pillar examines the "pedagogical translation" of Tanzanian mandates (DIRA 2050; Policy 2014/23) into ODL-friendly modular designs that prioritize reflective inquiry over rote learning.

Tutor Facilitative Capacity: Moving beyond traditional instruction, this component evaluates tutors as digital facilitators who bridge "transactional distance" through cognitive scaffolding and instructional modeling within virtual environments.

Autonomous Learner Engagement: Rooted in the ODL tenet of autonomy, this level analyzes how student teachers utilize self-regulation and digitally-mediated tools (e-portfolios, journals) to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Systemic & Contextual Mediators: This "barrier interface" recognizes that

reflective competence is mediated by the digital divide, institutional constraints, and the "policy-practice gap," which collectively catalyze or stifle professional growth.

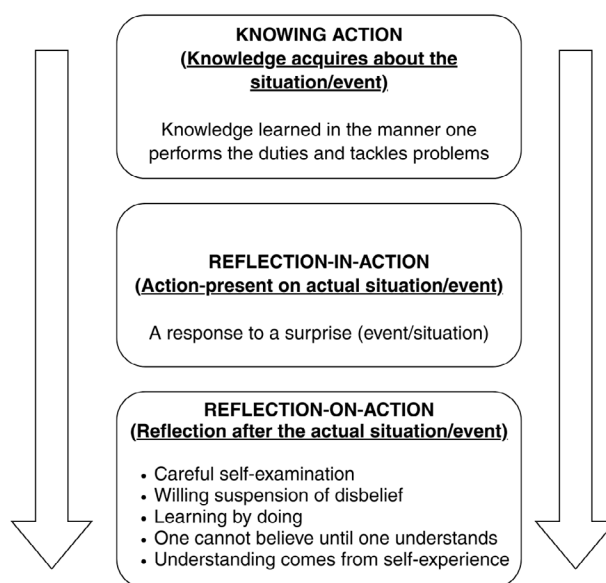
Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Dewey's (1933) disciplined inquiry and Schön's (1983) reflection-in/on-action, this study conceptualizes reflective practice in ODL as a mediated interaction between institutional structures, digital tools, and pedagogical engagement. Unlike traditional settings, ODL reflection is shaped by curriculum design, technological affordances, and online competence.

As shown in Figure 2, reflective outcomes depend on the alignment between curricular expectations, tutor facilitation, and assessment strategies. While misalignment constrains depth, coherent integration enhances professional learning. This framework identifies leverage points for strengthening reflective pedagogy at IAE and OUT.

Figure 2

Schön's (1987) reflective practicum framework



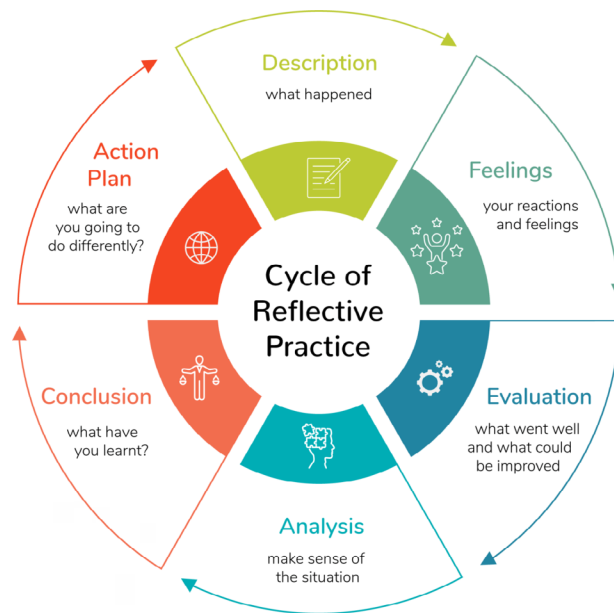
Note. Ideas of Villegas-Reimers' 2003's model of TRP in combination with modified Schön's 1983's Theory of Reflective Practicum

Analytical Framework

This study operationalizes Schön's (1983) Cyclical Reflective Practice (CRP) model, in Figure 3, to examine the ODL teaching-learning ecosystem. The framework ensures a rigorous analysis of how reflective judgments are enacted in distance environments.

Figure 3

Adapted Analytical Framework based on Schön (1983)



The analytical process followed six interrelated stages:

1. **Description:** Mapping RPs within ODL curriculum and virtual practicum structures.
2. **Feelings:** Capturing tutors' and student teachers' affective responses and motivation via online surveys.
3. **Evaluation:** Measuring the digital effectiveness of RPs by triangulating mixed-method data.
4. **Analysis:** Isolating the technological and institutional factors enabling or constraining ODL engagement.
5. **Conclusion:** Synthesizing systemic gaps, specifically regarding inconsistent implementation and tutor digital readiness.
6. **Action Planning:** Developing evidence-based strategies to formalize reflective pedagogy in ODL teacher education.

This framework shifts the focus from traditional classroom settings to knowing-in-action within virtual spaces. It provides a structured lens to identify "leverage points" for strengthening the reflective capacity of Tanzanian student teachers within mediated, asynchronous environments.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognized role of reflective practices (RPs) in developing professional competence in teacher education, their integration within Tanzania's open and distance learning (ODL) programs remains uneven and weakly structured. ODL environments present distinctive conditions such as asynchronous learning, limited virtual supervision, reliance on digital feedback, and unequal technological access that fundamentally shape how reflection

is enacted. At institutions such as the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), these conditions are compounded by limited tutor preparation in digital pedagogy, inconsistent institutional guidelines, and assessment practices that treat reflection as a graded task rather than a learning process. As a result, student teachers may complete programs with limited capacity for critical self-evaluation and adaptive teaching in virtual or blended classrooms. Empirical evidence on how reflective practices function within ODL teacher education in Tanzania remains limited, necessitating focused investigation.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine the integration of reflective practices in ODL-based teacher education at IAE and OUT by:

1. Analyzing how reflective practices are embedded in curriculum and policy within distance and blended learning modes;
2. Examining tutors' perceptions and facilitation of reflective practices in ODL contexts; and
3. Assessing the extent and forms of student teachers' engagement with digital reflective tools.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach guided by a pragmatic paradigm to examine how reflective practices (RPs) are integrated within open and distance learning (ODL) teacher education in Tanzania. A concurrent embedded design was adopted, prioritizing qualitative data while using quantitative evidence to support and validate emerging patterns.

The study was conducted at two public ODL institutions: the Open University of Tanzania (OUT) and the Institute of Adult Education (IAE). These institutions were purposively selected to represent degree- and diploma-level teacher education delivered through distance and blended learning modes. Participants comprised 128 respondents, including eight tutors/lecturers and 120 second-year student teachers. Second-year students were targeted due to their recent engagement in online teaching practice, providing direct exposure to reflective activities in virtual contexts.

Data were collected through four complementary methods: documentary review of curricula and institutional guidelines, virtual semi-structured interviews with tutors/lecturers, online surveys administered to student teachers, and virtual classroom observations. Instruments were administered digitally and, where necessary, translated into Swahili to ensure clarity and contextual relevance. Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent, anonymity, and secure data handling were observed throughout.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) framework, integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence. Qualitative data were coded and organized into themes reflecting patterns of RP

implementation, facilitation, and engagement in ODL contexts. Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to indicate the prevalence and forms of reflective practice. Schön's reflective practice framework (reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action) was applied as the primary analytical lens to align data interpretation with the study objectives.

This approach enabled a focused examination of how reflective practices are enacted, constrained, and supported within Tanzanian ODL teacher education.

Integration of Reflective Practices (RPs) into the Curriculum

Results

This study explored how RPs are incorporated into the ODL teacher education curriculum at the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT). Key RP activities analyzed included online journaling, e-portfolio creation, digital action research, collaborative teaching, and peer feedback. Document review of syllabi, course outlines, and policy frameworks revealed partial but meaningful integration, with variations in structure, assessment, and formalization.

The study analyzed the extent and manner in which various reflective practices, such as journaling, portfolio creation, action research, collaborative teaching, peer briefing, and video analysis are integrated, taught, and assessed within the ODL teacher education curriculum. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Structured Inclusion of Reflective Practices (RPs) in the ODE Curriculum

Reflective Practice	Inclusion in Curriculum (Modules/Courses)	Teaching Methods	Assessment	Pages Referenced
Reflective Journaling	<i>Integrated within the Ethics of Teaching and Curriculum and Instruction</i>	Individual digital writing exercises and reflections	Indirectly assessed through projects or online presentations	5–6, 14, 21
Creation of Portfolio	<i>Highlighted as part of the assessment tools (Work Portfolio)</i>	Compilation of e-portfolios including lesson plans and reflections	Assessed through continuous online evaluation (5% of professional courses)	22

Reflective Practice	Inclusion in Curriculum (Modules/Courses)	Teaching Methods	Assessment	Pages Referenced
Action Research	<i>Included in Education Research</i>	Digital research projects exploring online classroom challenges	Assessed via coursework projects and final evaluations	6–7, 22
Collaborative/ Team Teaching	<i>Applied in virtual practical teaching sessions (Teaching Practice)</i>	Group lesson preparation, virtual teaching, and peer feedback	Performance evaluated under <i>Ufundishaji wa Shule Jirani</i> (25% of marks)	13–14, 21
Peer Briefing	<i>Encouraged in virtual classroom simulations (Role-Play/ Simulation)</i>	Students provide peer feedback during mock teaching sessions	Evaluated under <i>Ufundishaji Igizo/Kiduchu</i> (20% of marks)	13–14, 21
Video Reflective Analysis	<i>Not explicitly included</i>	Recording virtual teaching sessions for review	Potentially included in e-portfolios or assignments	Not specified

Note. Acquired from field data, 2025

Also, the study analyzed the institutional policies, support mechanisms, and course structures at IAE and OUT, highlighting how these frameworks enable or limit the promotion and systematic integration of reflective practices in ODL teacher education. The institutional policies at IAE and OUT were evaluated to examine structural support for RPs in ODE. Table 2 highlights the findings.

Table 2

Policy and Structural Support in the Promotion of RPs

Aspect	IAE	OUT
Institutional Policy	Supportive policies emphasize quality ODE and student-centered learning; limited explicit RP focus	Policies encourage competency-based online teacher training; RP mention is implicit

Aspect	IAE	OUT
Student Teacher Training	General ODE teacher preparation without dedicated RP modules	Includes digital teaching skills training but lacks structured reflective components
Support Mechanisms	Limited digital mentorship and online guidance	Virtual supervision exists but RP-specific support is minimal
Course Objectives and Content	Emphasizes academic and pedagogical excellence online; RP integration is indirect	Focus on digital lesson delivery and pedagogical competence; reflective components are implicit
Teaching Methods	Predominantly online lectures with limited interactive reflection	Online discussions and practical sessions were used; reflection is not systematically integrated
Assessment	Focus on digital lesson completion, assignments, and knowledge application	Some continuous assessment; RP-specific tasks not formally evaluated
Expected Outcomes	Competency in online teaching and adherence to ODE standards; limited reflective skill development	Student teachers acquire basic ODE competencies; reflective growth not systematically targeted

Note. Acquired from field data, 2025

In addition, the review of teaching and evaluation strategies in Table 3, indicates the integration of RPs remains limited and largely informal at IAE and OUT, with a predominant reliance on traditional online teaching methods.

Table 3

Teaching and Evaluation Strategies of RPs

Aspect	IAE	OUT
Teaching Strategies	Teacher-centered online methods dominate; minimal structured reflection	Mixed approaches; some collaborative and discussion-based sessions, reflection not formalized
Methods	Traditional online instruction with limited RP tools	Combination of lectures, discussions, and limited peer feedback
Student Engagement	Few opportunities for collaborative reflection	Engagement through virtual discussion groups; RP internalized individually

Aspect	IAE	OUT
Evaluation Strategies	Focus on assignments and lesson delivery; no direct RP assessment	Some online assessment tools are used; reflection is rarely formally evaluated
Feedback Mechanisms	Primarily academic performance	Digital notes and video calls; RP follow-up inconsistent
Reflective Tasks	No structured digital journals, self-assessment, or peer evaluation	Ad hoc reflection encouraged during virtual teaching, not systematically

These findings reveal a reliance on traditional online teaching and evaluation strategies with limited integration of RPs.

Reflective journaling is embedded in courses such as Ethics of Teaching and Curriculum and Instruction, mostly as individual digital exercises. Assessment is indirect, through projects or online presentations. Portfolio creation is formally included in professional courses, evaluated continuously, reflecting policy emphasis on competency-based ODE programs. Action research occurs in methodology courses, connecting theory to digital classroom challenges, though formal assessment is limited. Collaborative teaching and peer briefing appear in virtual practical sessions, contributing 20–25% of course marks. Video-based reflection exists informally but is not systematically implemented.

Policy review indicated general support for ODE and competency-based learning; however, explicit RP-focused guidelines, structured digital mentorship, and systematic assessment of reflective skills are lacking (Table 5). Teaching methods remain predominantly teacher-centered, with limited collaborative reflection opportunities. Evaluation emphasizes assignments and lesson completion, with RP-specific assessment minimal or ad hoc (Table 6).

Discussion

These findings show that while RPs are present in Tanzanian ODL curricula, their integration is inconsistent and often implicit, mirroring global observations that reflective learning is frequently under-structured in distance programs (Akhigbe & Monday, 2022; Mathew et al., 2021). Journaling and portfolio creation support reflection-on-action stages, fostering critical thinking and professional documentation, but indirect assessment limits the depth and transferability of learning. Action research reinforces analysis and action planning in Schön's cycle, yet the scope remains narrow. Collaborative and peer-based activities enable reflection-in-action, enhancing real-time adaptation and social learning, aligning with global best practices emphasizing peer interaction and feedback (Loughran, 2010).

Policy and institutional gaps constrain systematic RP engagement. The absence of explicit RP-focused policy, structured mentorship, and formal assessment reduces opportunities for STs to complete Schön's reflective cycle, potentially

limiting professional growth and adaptive expertise. Teacher-centered online methods and minimal collaborative platforms further restrict experiential reflection. Curricular integration of RPs can be strengthened by:

1. Formalizing video-based reflection and structured digital journaling.
2. Aligning assessment rubrics with reflective objectives to capture evidence of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.
3. Embedding mentorship and peer-feedback mechanisms to scaffold collaborative reflection.
4. Reviewing policies to explicitly prioritize structured RPs as core learning outcomes, ensuring that all stages of Schön's cycle are addressed.

The curriculum provides meaningful but fragmented opportunities for reflective learning. Systematic embedding of RPs is critical to preparing Tanzanian STs for adaptive, reflective teaching in contemporary ODL environments.

CTs' Perceptions of Reflective Practices in ODE Pre-Service Teacher Education

Results

Three major themes emerged from CT interviews: (1) recognition of RPs' value despite doubts about feasibility, (2) marginal and inconsistent integration of RPs into teaching and assessment, and (3) limited institutional support and resources.

CTs universally acknowledged that RPs enhance STs' professional growth, adaptability, and critical thinking. CT4 noted:

Reflection helps students see what went well, what did not work as expected, and what needs to be improved (Jan. 16, 2025).

While CT2 emphasized:

Reflective skills help them become more effective teachers in digital classrooms (Jan. 6, 2025).

In contrast, some CTs questioned the practicality of ODE; CT3 stated:

Too much reflection without action doesn't help; teaching is something you must do, not only think online (Jan. 14, 2025).

and CT7 added:

RPs seem theoretical in virtual settings (Feb. 27, 2025).

CTs reported varied integration strategies: digital questioning, online discussions, micro-teaching observation, and feedback sessions. CT3 explained:

I ask questions online, observe virtual micro-teaching, give feedback, and hold discussions to share successes and mistakes

(Jan. 16, 2025)

However, structured tools like digital journals, e-portfolios, or peer evaluation were inconsistently applied, and RP incorporation remained ad hoc.

CTs actively facilitated reflection despite minimal institutional support. CT5 stated:

I remind students that reflection is not just for marks; it is an important skill for their teaching career (Jan. 14, 2025).

while CT6 noted,

Portfolios include lesson plans, self-assessment, and peer feedback to help students grow into effective virtual teachers (Jan. 14, 2025).

Discussion

These findings indicate that tutors value RPs and engage STs proactively, but practical constraints and weak institutional guidance limit systematic implementation. Skepticism about ODE feasibility highlights the need to scaffold reflection within digital teaching. Partial integration aligns with Schön's reflective cycle, supporting description and evaluation stages but underutilizing structured reflection and feedback. The gaps in policy, training, and digital resources present opportunities to formalize RP modules, strengthen assessment and feedback mechanisms, and enhance alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional support.

CTs' perceptions reveal intrinsic commitment to RP, yet marginal incorporation and inconsistent structures constrain its full potential in Tanzanian ODE teacher education.

The Extent of Student Teachers' Engagement in Acquiring Reflective Practices

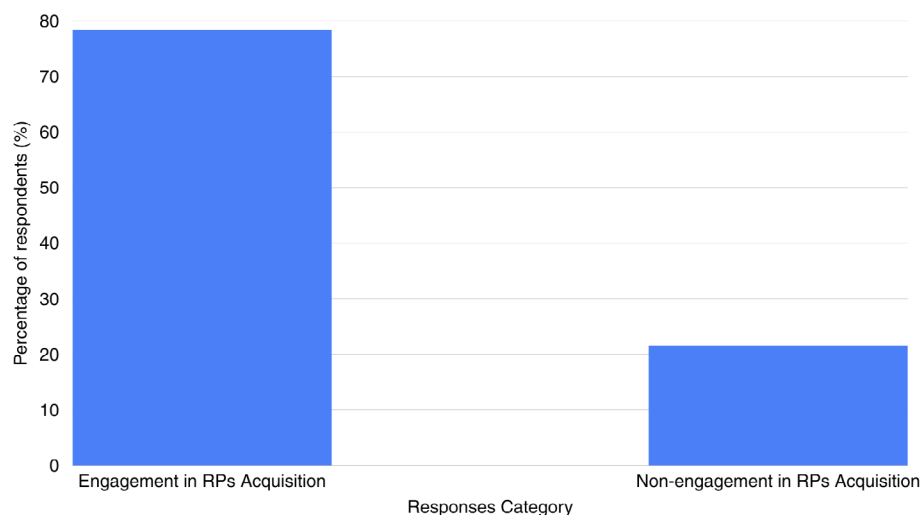
Results

Analysis of virtual classroom observations, survey responses, and structured interviews revealed three key findings regarding ST engagement with RPs.

First, overall engagement was high: 78.4% of STs reported active participation, confirmed through observation of e-portfolios, digital journals, peer debriefings, video analysis, and self-assessment (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Engagement of Student Teachers in the Acquisition of RPs



Note. Acquired from field data, 2025

Table 4 presents the distribution of ST responses regarding tutor assessment, feedback, and clarity of RP criteria.

Table 4

Assessment of RPs

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
My tutors regularly assessed my progress in reflective practices.	2 (1.7)	4 (3.3)	21 (17.4)	59 (48.8)	35 (28.9)	4.0	0.86
I received constructive feedback on my reflective practice assignments.	3 (2.5)	6 (5.0)	13 (10.8)	63 (52.5)	35 (29.2)	4.0	0.91

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
The assessment criteria for reflective practices were clear and understandable.	4 (3.3)	10 (8.1)	15 (12.2)	57 (46.3)	37 (30.1)	3.9	1.02

Note. Acquired from field data, 2025

Most STs positively perceive RP teaching and assessment, with high agreement on regular assessment (77.7%), constructive feedback (81.7%), and clear criteria (76.4%).

Quantitative measures showed strong engagement in e-portfolio creation (Mean = 4.4, SD = 0.79), collaborative/team teaching (Mean = 4.4, SD = 0.82), and reflective journaling (Mean = 4.1, SD = 0.88) (Table 5).

Table 5

Engagement with RPs

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Reflective journaling is a regular part of my ODE program.	5 (4.0)	1 (0.8)	6 (4.8)	66 (53.2)	46 (37.1)	4.1	0.88
Action research projects are helping me develop reflective practices.	4 (3.2)	4 (3.2)	16 (12.9)	63 (50.8)	37 (29.8)	4.0	0.92
Creating an e-portfolio is enhancing my reflective thinking skills.	2 (1.7)	2 (1.7)	5 (4.1)	47 (38.8)	65 (53.7)	4.4	0.79
Collaboration and team teaching are emphasized in my virtual training to promote RPs.	4 (3.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (1.7)	50 (41.7)	64 (53.3)	4.4	0.82

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	STD
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
Training on virtual peer briefing sessions is contributing to my reflective development.	4 (3.3)	3 (2.5)	8 (6.6)	67 (55.4)	39 (32.2)	4.1	0.88
Video reflective analysis is a learned reflective tool for my practice.	3 (2.5)	5 (4.2)	9 (7.5)	63 (52.5)	40 (33.3)	4.1	0.89

Note. Acquired from field data, 2025

STs reported that these tools enhanced autonomy, documentation of teaching experiences, and critical reflection; one ST explained:

Journaling and team-teaching activities make me aware of what works and what doesn't in online classrooms, but sometimes I still rely on tutor guidance to validate my reflections.

Second, engagement depth varied. Observations highlighted a tension between autonomy and tutor dependence, with some STs proactively adjusting lessons, while others strictly followed lesson plans awaiting tutor input. E-portfolios and virtual peer briefings were consistently used, but video analysis and structured online journaling were unevenly adopted, reflecting technological and institutional constraints. Independent samples t-tests showed no significant differences in RP engagement by prior education level (College Certificate vs. Secondary Education; $t = 1.11$, $df = 118$, $p = 0.269$), indicating comparable experiences across subgroups (see Table 6).

Table 6

Assessment of RPs

t-Test for Equality of Means	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Equal variances assumed	1.11	118.0	0.269	0.12	0.11
Equal variances not assumed (Welch's correction)	1.09	101.7	0.277	0.12	0.11

Note. Acquired from field data, 2025

Third, RP assessment was generally perceived positively: 77.7% of STs reported regular tutor assessment, 81.7% received constructive feedback, and 76.4% found assessment criteria clear (Table 6). However, qualitative data suggested

reflection was often task-oriented, with STs completing activities primarily for grades rather than authentic professional growth.

Discussion

Findings indicate that STs in Tanzanian ODL programs engage actively with structured RP tools, demonstrating emerging reflective capability consistent with Schön's cyclical reflective practice model. Variability in engagement depth highlights the influence of institutional support, tutor facilitation, and digital infrastructure on authentic reflection. Equitable engagement across educational backgrounds underscores the central role of program design rather than prior experience. Assessment practices motivate participation but risk promoting compliance over intrinsic reflective development, emphasizing the need for structured, standardized, and scaffolded RP activities. Enhancing tutor guidance, digital access, and clear evaluation criteria can strengthen STs' internalization of RPs, fostering professional competence and autonomy in ODL teacher education.

Synthesis of Findings

Across the three objectives, the findings reveal a consistent pattern of partial but promising integration of reflective practices in Tanzanian ODL pre-service teacher education, shaped by curriculum design, tutor agency, and student engagement within constrained institutional environments.

At the curriculum and policy level, RPs are present but fragmented, embedded implicitly through journaling, portfolios, action research, and collaborative activities, yet weakly supported by explicit policy directives, structured mentorship, and standardized assessment frameworks. This structural ambiguity sets the conditions under which tutors and student teachers operate.

Tutors respond to these conditions with strong professional commitment, valuing reflective practices and actively facilitating reflection through questioning, feedback, micro-teaching, and portfolio supervision, even in the absence of formal guidance or resources. However, inconsistent institutional support and skepticism about the feasibility of its implementation in ODL contexts limit the depth and systematic enactment of reflection, resulting in ad hoc implementation that addresses only selected stages of Schön's reflective cycle. Tutor beliefs thus function as a mediating force bridging curricular intentions and student experiences, but without sufficient structural reinforcement.

Student teachers, in turn, demonstrate high levels of engagement with available reflective tools, particularly e-portfolios, collaborative teaching, and journaling, indicating recognition of the professional value of reflection. Yet engagement remains uneven and often assessment-driven, with variations in reflective depth shaped by tutor scaffolding, digital access, and clarity of expectations rather than prior educational background. Taken together, the findings suggest that reflective practices in Tanzanian ODL programs are not absent but under-institutionalized: effectiveness depends less on individual motivation and more on alignment among curriculum design, tutor preparation, assessment

practices, and digital infrastructure. Strengthening this alignment is essential for transforming reflective activities from task-oriented compliance into sustained professional learning.

Conclusions

This study examined the incorporation, perception, and student engagement with reflective practices (RPs) in ODL-based pre-service teacher education at the Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and the Open University of Tanzania (OUT), guided by Schön's (1983, 1987) cyclical reflective practice framework. The conclusions are drawn directly from the three research objectives and corresponding findings.

Integration of Reflective Practices into Curriculum and Policy

The study concludes that although RPs are acknowledged within institutional curricula and policy frameworks, their integration remains partial and largely implicit. Reflective activities such as e-portfolios, action research, collaborative teaching, and peer feedback are present, but key practices, particularly structured journaling, video-based reflection, and guided reflective cycles are inconsistently embedded and weakly assessed. This reveals a clear gap between policy intentions and operational practice, where reflection is endorsed conceptually but insufficiently supported through explicit guidelines, mentorship structures, and assessment mechanisms.

College Tutors' Perceptions of Reflective Practices

Institutional tutors generally value RPs and recognize their role in enhancing professional growth, pedagogical adaptability, and critical thinking in ODL contexts. However, tutors' capacity to facilitate systematic reflection is constrained by limited professional training in digital pedagogy and reflective facilitation. As a result, tutor support often emphasizes assignment feedback rather than sustained guidance through iterative reflective cycles. This finding suggests that effective RP implementation depends not only on tutor commitment but also on institutional investment in tutor capacity and clear operational frameworks.

Student Teachers' Engagement with Reflective Practices

Student teachers demonstrate high levels of engagement with available reflective tools, particularly e-portfolios, collaborative teaching, and peer debriefings. Nevertheless, the depth and consistency of reflection vary considerably. A persistent tension emerges between autonomous reflection and reliance on tutor validation, with many student teachers engaging in reflection primarily as an assessed task rather than as a developmental process. This indicates that reflective engagement is shaped more by institutional structures, assessment practices, and tutor scaffolding than by students' prior educational background.

Overall, the study concludes that Tanzanian ODL-based teacher education has established foundational conditions for reflective practice, but full realization

is constrained by misalignment between curriculum design, tutor facilitation, assessment practices, and institutional support. Without systematic integration and coherent support structures, RPs risk remaining fragmented activities rather than functioning as sustained mechanisms for professional learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following context-sensitive recommendations are proposed:

Strengthening Policy Operationalization

National and institutional policies should articulate explicit, actionable guidelines for embedding RPs within ODL teacher education curricula. These guidelines should specify reflective tools, assessment expectations, and mentorship arrangements, while accommodating technological constraints through low-tech and mobile-friendly reflective options.

Enhancing Tutor Professional Capacity

Institutions should provide targeted professional development for college tutors in digital pedagogy, reflective facilitation, and formative feedback. Strengthening tutor competence in guiding structured reflective cycles will reduce reliance on ad hoc practices and support deeper student engagement.

Standardizing Reflective Practice Structures

ODL programs should adopt standardized yet flexible RP mechanisms, including structured e-portfolio templates, guided journaling prompts, scheduled peer debriefings, and aligned assessment rubrics. Standardization will promote consistency, equity, and transparency across courses and institutions.

Improving Technological and Pedagogical Support

Where digital infrastructure is limited, institutions should legitimize and integrate low-tech reflective alternatives such as offline journals, asynchronous discussion forums, and community-based reflection activities. This ensures continuity of reflective engagement across diverse resource contexts.

Fostering a Reflective Institutional Culture

Institutional leadership should actively promote reflective practice as a core professional competency by embedding RPs in curriculum expectations, recognizing reflective engagement in assessment practices, and supporting online communities of practice among tutors and student teachers.

Monitoring and Continuous Improvement

ODL institutions should establish mechanisms for periodic monitoring of RP implementation, including review of assessment practices, quality of feedback, and student engagement patterns. Such monitoring will support evidence-

informed refinement of curricula and professional development initiatives.

Implementing these recommendations will strengthen the systematic integration of reflective practices in Tanzanian ODL teacher education, supporting the development of autonomous, adaptive, and professionally reflective teachers capable of responding effectively to both virtual and face-to-face teaching contexts.

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