

Five Years of Online Teaching Lessons Learned: An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

This paper outlines the researcher's individual growth and evolution of online instruction over the span five years. The details of this paper include a synthesis of recent research combined with online teaching experience. The method used is autoethnography in which the author seeks to analyze personal experience within the cultural context of teaching in the virtual classroom. The author seeks to answer: what makes an effective online learning experience? The data collection included instructor notes, faculty peer and student evaluations, and course materials. The result is a document that serves as a guideline for current and future online instructors. The paper provides a glimpse into the process of learning how to embrace and understand the pedagogy of online teaching. The author recognizes that this type of research does not utilize quantitative data, but relies on data collected through qualitative means. However, the information provided in this paper is grounded in research and enhanced by personal experience.

Keywords: online teaching, online instruction

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Introduction

A simple Google search of the best practices of online teaching will provide millions of hits. However, as a professor who teaches in higher education in a variety of formats, I have learned that implementing best practices is harder than one may think. I began teaching online approximately five years ago. I teach in face-to-face, blended or hybrid, and fully online formats. The learning curve has been hard at times. This paper is a journey describing the progression of becoming an online instructor. It serves the purpose of assisting others through their own journey.

The decision was made to utilize an autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). In this case, the cultural experience is the online or virtual classroom. This analysis involves examining data collected over five years to answer the question: what makes an effective online learning experience? The exploration is grounded in research, and the author's learning and experiences. This researcher acknowledges the influence one may have on the outcomes. In fact, Ellis, Adams and Bochner state, "Autoethnographers recognize the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process" (para.3, 2010). Ultimately, the researcher seeks to create a document that is informative and useful to the audience through providing a plan for entering the online arena and improving oneself as an online instructor.

Literature Review

Online learning continues to gain momentum and is unlikely to ebb in the future. In Fall 2013, there were 5,522,194 students enrolled in distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics). It is essential to continue to develop methods to address the needs of these students and to assist the instructor in providing a quality learning experience.

Faculty Perceptions

In light of the increased participation in online courses, several researchers have examined the perceptions of instructors and students to online learning. Philip and Cain (2015) interviewed six online instructors. The instructors shared their perspectives of their first experience teaching online. The results of these interviews were broken down into five categories: perspectives of online teaching, online pedagogy, benefits of the online classroom, challenges, and instructor identity. Several key findings were explained. Instructors indicated that they felt that online instruction provided better accessibility for the adult learner. One instructor felt that the face-to-face class provided more opportunity for creativity and flexibility. Philip and Cain (2015) identified one major issue as the management and participation of the student in the online class (p. 445). In reference to instruction transition to online teaching, some professors simply attempted to recreate their face-to-face class into the online environment. Several indicated that they had to confront their own pedagogical beliefs about teaching and their identities as instructors.

Wray, Lowenthal, Bates & Stevens (2008) surveyed 10 online and face-to-face instructors concerning how they plan differently for these formats. Wray et al (2008) determined that instructors do think and teach differently in the two formats. The researchers concluded that instructors need faculty development and instructional design support (p.243) to determine what works and does not work in the online classroom.

Student Perceptions

In a review of research, Kauffman (2015) examined the perceptions and characteristics of a strong online student and found that students with high emotional intelligence and self-regulation skills are often the most successful. In addition, Kauffman (2015) found other factors to be relevant such as organizational skills, time management, and reflective abilities to play a role in the student's success. In reference to factors that enhance learning, Kauffman (2015) indicated that clear outcomes and organized course design are both important. Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang (2015) determined several key components that students perceived as leading to success in the online classroom. These included engaging, enjoyable, and interactive content and lectures, learning with peers, promoting critical thinking, and learning that is self-directed (p.4).

Quality Instruction

Yang and Cornelius (2005) discussed issues with the quality of online course and suggest methods to ensure effective online instruction. These researchers explain that the role of the instructor changes in the online classroom; online education is student-centered education, whereas the traditional education is regarded as professor-centered education (Yang & Cornelius, 2005). The instructor becomes more of a facilitator than a lecturer. These researchers also indicate that the role of the student changes as the learner must become more active and motivated, rather than passive as in a lecture classroom scenario. In addition, Yang and Cornelius (2005) discuss the areas concerning new technologies and assessment in this environment. Moreover, the Yang & Cornelius (2005) suggest that the design of the course is integral to the success of the course. Instructors must structure discussion to be motivating and engaging. This can be accomplished through a variety of media, varying assignments, and through problems solving. The learner must be considered in the design. Another essential consideration, as stated by these authors, is creating and fostering an online community.

Other researchers have made suggestions for quality instruction in the online classroom. McAlister, Riveria and Holman (2001) recommend that faculty use a self-evaluation processes of their online courses indicating that this procedure will help instructors better prepare, design, and deliver online courses. Alley and Jansak (2001) identified 10 keys to essential qualities online learning. This includes student responsibility, motivation, and reflection. These authors also suggest considering student learning styles when designing the course (p. 617). In addition, Alley and Jansak (2001) suggest keeping in mind that knowledge is constructed, not transmitted. Brown (2002) also provided suggestions that included considering a more informal tone to build community.

More recently, Eliot, Rhoades, Jackson, & Mandernach (2015) expressed the need for quality professional development experiences for online instructors and ultimately “fostering student learning” (p. 161). These researchers indicate that faculty prefer professional development experiences that provide information they can readily apply to their courses. Eliot et al (2015) also state that faculty also prefer opportunities that are offered in flexible formats due to time constraints.

Methodology

For this research, the author chose to use an autoethnographic method to gather data to respond to the question: What makes an effective online learning experience? In this, the author examined student course evaluations compile over five years from fully online and hybrid (blended) courses, faculty peer evaluations of online courses, and anecdotal personal experiences.

The value of the autoethnographic method is that it combines autobiography where the author relates an experience using hindsight (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011) and insight. In addition, this method includes ethnography, “when researchers do ethnography, they study a ... shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture” (Maso, 2001, as cited in Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland & Lofland, p.136-144). In the study presented here, the culture examined is the online classroom.

The student course evaluation consists of two parts. The first section contains statements in which the student rate, strongly agree to strongly disagree. The second section asks the students to comment on what contributed most to their learning? The latter is the focus of this research analysis. In the examination of 184 students’ free responses, a word/phrase frequency analysis was conducted to determine significant trends. Using the online resource, *Text-Alyser* students’ responses were entered and analyzed.

In a separate analysis, three peer evaluations were collected over the past three years and examined. There are several components to the faculty peer evaluation form. However, this study examines the section pertaining to online instruction only. The focus areas are: Content, Organization and Preparation, Online Management, Assessment and Evaluation, and Other Environmental Concerns. Using the same text-analysis resource, faculty peer evaluation comments were analyzed for commonalities within these categories.

Anecdotal information was also gathered from teaching experience, as this researcher has grown as an online educator. This has been compiled from professional development experiences, individual research, teaching experience and course materials. The results are reported as suggestions and recommendations for the online instructor.

Results

Students were asked: What contributed most to your learning? One hundred eighty-four responses were analyzed for word/phrase frequency. This analysis was

conducted to determine what students feel is most important in the online classroom. In order of frequency, the 6 most utilized phrases appear below:

- Timely feedback
- Consistent communication
- On-going support & interaction
- Helpful & knowledgeable instructor
- Clear directions
- Engaging assignments

Similarly in a second analysis, three faculty peer evaluations were examined for word/phrase frequency. Categorically, the word/phrases appear below in order of frequency:

- Content – variety, knowledgeable, appropriate
- Organization and Planning – clearly, reasonable, current, design
- Management – overview, clear instructions, orientation
- Assessment and Evaluation– clearly stated, rubrics, goals
- Other Environment Concerns – enjoyed, discussions, responsive, collaborative

The intention of the word analysis was to determine commonalities in students' and faculty's responses. Although taken out of context, meaning may be lost. However, this does not appear to be the case in this situation. The results of student and peer analyses are consistent. In fact, they reflect the similar word/phrases and descriptors.

Seeking to determine what makes an effective online learning experience, this research provides some key findings. One can interpret that both populations expect and desire clarity in instructions. This was exhibited in phrases such as clearly stated, clear directions and instructions. The phrase such as knowledgeable instructor was also consistent with both populations, referring to the area of content knowledge. One may assume that this is not different from the traditional classroom expectations. Faculty used the term "responsive" while the students used the words "helpful, consistent communication". This appears to be an integral expectation of both populations. Instructor communication was also identified in the research as a component needed in building the online community and providing students with on-going feedback within this setting.

In reflecting on this researcher's journey of becoming an online instructor, the process has been at times tedious and challenging, but also rewarding. Process is a key to the journey. In the beginning when assigned the first online course, it was much like a mourning period of the traditional class. It may sound extreme, but the emotions reflected denial, anger, anxiety and acceptance. Fortunately, the institution provided excellent professional development opportunities to assist in moving forward.

One particularly beneficial professional development experience explained how to create an interactive syllabus that aligned course goals with learning activities and coinciding assessments. This was extremely helpful in creating an organized course and enhancing student engagement. Other colleagues with more experience made themselves available to assist in learning how to navigate the online management

system, often referred to as the LMS (learning management system). Furthermore, the Instructional Technology department also was available to assist in creating video and utilizing other technology resources. These experiences made moving to online instruction a bit easier, but still not seamless. However, it is essential to incorporate these learning opportunities for the instructor. Without professional development experiences, online instructors will flounder and the learning process will take much longer.

Online instruction is a very time consuming process. In the experience of this author, everything takes longer that one may think. The quandary becomes the balance between the content, the activities, and the assessment. An instructor may feel they need to “tell” the student everything. However, by varying the learning activities this is not necessary. Using supplemental readings, videos and other sources can alleviate the need for long lecture videos. In fact, this author finds that short screencasts, can provide just what the students need. Research shows that long lecture videos are not viewed by the student and shorter clips are much more valuable. In fact the average viewing time for students is four minutes (Hibbert, 2014).

The commitment to teaching online is just that “a commitment”. The suggestion by many is to begin with a simple course design and then in subsequent offerings begin to include more technology and learning opportunities. This has worked well over the past five years for this author. Each semester, the commitment is made to learn and add one new technological component and to refine existing content. By thinking in this manner, the instructor does not become overwhelmed.

The individual anecdotal analysis resulted in a list of essential considerations. There are as follows:

- Does the course fit into an online or hybrid/blended format?
- Talk to colleagues, seek professional development opportunities
- Teaching online takes more time that you think
- At the start, keep it simple and short
- Not easy to simply transfer a traditional course to online. Consider redesigned not transferring.
- Face the challenges of managing the content and learning the online management system

Conclusion

One can utilize the information gathered as a way to help improving the online learning experience. The literature provides the background and this study confirms the research and provides suggestions for the online instructor. Analysis of students’ and faculty’s perceptions resulted in consistency in the needs and desires in the online classroom. This is an important finding as it serves to acknowledge the recommendations as online instruction moves forward.

Online instruction will continue to grow and change in the future and it will be interesting to see how the field progresses. Avoiding online instruction is no longer possible, but embracing this format with knowledge, support, and research is invaluable. This paper serves to continue the conversation of online instruction.

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