

Distance Learning in Modern Times: Challenges for Contemporary Solutions

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Abstract: This roundtable session explored engagement practices for practitioners and educators alike to meet the online needs of diverse learners. Classroom teaching has called for the need to be solely available online as a temporary solution. The purpose of this study is to explore the current role of effective distance learning practices in adult education and higher education, which has been forced center stage due to our ongoing global pandemic, known as COVID-19. Research data and faculty case stories related to personal and adult educational experiences will be highlighted. In particular, the study will evaluate the impact of recent events, such as the pandemic, on distance learning and pedagogical practices. Through the faculty case stories and data analysis, topics of discussion will be provided for best practices in distance education for adult learners.

Keywords: distance learning, faculty, online practices

The current role of effective distance learning practices in both public and higher education has been impacted by recent major events such as the COVID-19 outbreak. Due to the acceleration of COVID-19, there is a shift to learning in a solely online or virtual environment (Blakenberger & Williams, 2020). In public education, there is a need to provide instruction virtually and in a hybrid format, as many teachers have responded to this need. There are options for students to select in which format they prefer to learn in. Such options have called for educators to be available in a traditional face-to-face format and virtually in an online classroom in both synchronous and asynchronous environments.

This study seeks to explore how faculty members have responded to the need for virtual classroom learning and engagement practices to meet the modern needs of diverse learners. Classroom teaching practices have been solely accessible online in the time of COVID-19 (Barrett-Fox, Bayne, Cooper, & Espinosa, 2020). First, a literature review and conceptual framework will be discussed. Next, the research methodology will be described along with findings that will be shared. Subsequently, a discussion of the implications and future research will be examined.

Literature Review

Because faculty incur many challenges during COVID-19, the conceptual framework for this study relied on persistence theory (Tinto 1975; 1993) as a means to continue instruction and teaching, especially in a time of crisis due to the unprecedented pandemic. Recent events blurred all forms of instruction into online classrooms and assignments (Barrett-Fox, Bayne, Cooper, & Espinosa, 2020). Additionally, “K-12 and postsecondary education has had to shift to distance education formats” (Blakenberger & Williams, 2020, p. 415). Currently, many instructors and students have relied on available technology and online learning platforms to meet the needs of

diverse students in both public and postsecondary education. Additionally, Hazelkorn and Locke (2020) reported, “At a time when liberal democratic systems are coming under sustained pressure across the world, the potential role of education at all levels in underpinning democracy and human rights needs to be acknowledged and emphasized” (p. 134). The 2020 current epidemic, COVID-19, has revolutionized the role of K-12, adult, and higher education.

According to Thomas and Foster (2020), historical epidemics have been no stranger to higher education institutions, which were precursors to COVID-19, such as yellow fever of 1878, the typhoid outbreak of 1910, and the Spanish flu of 1918. “Higher education did not respond universally or with any consensus” (Thomas & Foster, 2020, p. 6). Considering over 100 years later, the same holds true with regard to system responses to the recent pandemic. There still appears to be no consensus with each response left to individual university systems, colleges, and school districts. Research on the instructional practices of university faculty members is important for educators to grow and provide additional perspectives on teaching practices in modern times.

Limitations. Because this study focused on distance learning practices currently in 2020 during COVID-19, literature on this topic was somewhat limited as the peer review process is lengthy. Additionally, previously mentioned historical epidemics existed before the advancements of technology and digital online learning platforms. Therefore, a limited number of published peer-reviewed sources were available at the time this study was conducted.

Research Design

Basic qualitative inquiry was used in this research study as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) described as seeking how meaning and experiences are created. They stated that qualitative research seeks answers to questions about how meaning and social experiences are created. Since this study’s main concern relied on understanding faculty member’s experiences of teaching during COVID-19, this design was selected.

Research Questions. Three questions guided this case study and include: (a) how did you teach and provide distance learning opportunities for students? (b) What did you find to be the most challenging teaching if anything? (c) What did you find to be the easiest teaching virtually if anything?

Data Collection. Basic interpretive qualitative inquiry of semi-structured, open-ended interviews were used to examine how faculty members in higher education institutions taught and provided distance learning opportunities to their students. The sample for this study included eight faculty members within the College of Education who were either presently teaching or had been a former graduate student instructor teaching at a university in central Texas (see Table 1). All interviews were conducted via Zoom or the phone and lasted no more than 30 minutes.

Data Analysis. Demographic data was compiled in a chart form to provide a snapshot of gender and years of experience in the current faculty role of each participant with the criteria that they taught or were teaching in 2020 during the spring, summer and/or fall semester. Interviews were transcribed and organized in a matrix for the purpose of cross analyzing the data to determine

common themes after comparing participant responses. A constant comparative approach to analyze the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used. First, each interview transcript was carefully read and analyzed to identify similarities and differences in faculty teaching practices (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Second, a thematic analysis to code and categorize specific practices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) took place. Subsequent to data analysis, thematic findings were determined.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics of Faculty Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Years in current role
Chris	Male	3
Lily	Female	5
Rebecca	Female	6
Kay	Female	4
Kyra	Female	3
Gwen	Female	7
Susan	Female	7
Karen	Female	4

Based on the demographic data, all participants were in their current faculty role for a minimum of three years and reported prior experience teaching in online classes.

Findings

Findings reveal that four themes were prevalent in this study, including *motivation, prior experience, flexibility, and immediate feedback*.

Motivation. The theme of motivation was found after all eight participants reported that they were motivated by their students in various ways such as mentoring them into their profession, building a learning community in the classroom, or building relationships with students in an online community. Kay stated, “This is our class. This is our journey, and I’m going to learn just as much from them, as they are learning from me. Being able to serve as a resource for them, but also knowing that they’re going to serve as a resource for me, that is what I find the most motivating.” Students were the primary factor that drove the participants to keep going with online instruction and to adjust the syllabus if need be regarding the scheduling of assignments.

Prior Experience. All participants reported that they had had prior experience teaching online, which indicated what was found to be the easiest circumstance during the pandemic. In this regard, the issues of distance learning calling for teaching practices during the time of COVID-19 were nothing new to the participants. According to a participant named Rebecca, “All of my classes were online, so I didn’t have as much impact as my colleagues who had fully face-to-face classes. They had to adjust their syllabi to reflect possibly different assignments, different times to meet possibly.” While the majority of participants found it relatively easy to adjust their online courses to meet the instructional needs of their students, they did mention the need to recognize that the pandemic is a time of crisis and to be mindful of the emotional or personal experiences of their students.

Flexibility. Participants discussed how they may have had a few students who reported that they were sick with COVID-19 or feeling major anxiety during the pandemic practicing socially distancing during these unprecedented times and constantly wearing masks in public. Faculty members must be flexible with regard to the course timeline, especially during the pandemic. Susan reported, “That was really the key for this past year, what I think is flexibility. Yeah, I know we have some major learner outcomes I feel that we need to address in this course, but how we address them and when we address them can be really flexible.” It was important for participants to be flexible about syllabus timelines in efforts to adjust deadlines where needed as well as be sensitive to students’ emotional needs.

Immediate Feedback. When faculty members were asked about key challenges while teaching virtually, the idea that students may assume that instructors are available 24/7 was reported in that there is a false sense of immediate feedback by virtual students especially in a time of crisis. A participant named Gwen stated, “People who are studying or doing classes online tend to expect higher return of emails, responses, things like that.” It is important to be mindful that faculty members are also experiencing stressors from the pandemic in both their personal and professional roles. That being said, available virtual office hours and feedback timeline communications are imperative between faculty members and virtual students.

Implications and Future Research

This study offers implications and informs future research. The findings indicate that all faculty were motivated by their students; however, all faculty participants were within one College of Education at one university. This may not be true of all academic disciplines. Additionally, all participants had prior experience teaching virtually, which may not be the case for other academic disciplines. The themes of flexibility and immediate feedback regarding the teaching responsibilities of virtual instructors were evident in this study.

Future research as discussed in this round table virtual presentation, indicated the fact that other content areas such as science, which requires a lab component, may not be as easily formatted to an online classroom for both faculty and students. How does a faculty member adjust their virtual teaching practices to be all-inclusive of hands-on learning strategies that are difficult to provide in a virtual classroom? The same may hold true for other content areas that require a hands-on learning component, such as a science lab. Additionally, future research may examine digital learning technology platforms for teachers and instructors to acquire professional development learning opportunities to understand best practices for virtual teaching and learning to meet the needs of online students.

Conclusion

Distance learning during modern unprecedented times concerning COVID-19 is mandated within all K-12 and postsecondary classes at diverse levels in efforts to prioritize health, safety, and wellness for students. The prior levels of virtual teaching experiences by faculty members are imperative and relative to the successful experiences of students in virtual classes. Interestingly, faculty members in a College of Education though somewhat challenged, did not struggle to

provide online learning for their students as most had prior experience, were motivated by their students, and understood the need to be flexible and provide feedback when time allowed.

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