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# Teacher Education in Online Classrooms: An Inquiry into Instructors' Lived Experiences

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**Abstract**

Across Canada and around the world, online technologies are becoming widely used and accepted as effective modes of learning. This essay traces the initial forays into teaching online classes by three Faculty of Education professors at one small Canadian university and an instructional designer / teacher who joined part-way through the research journey. Included are our understandings of how our teaching practices evolved amidst initial uncertainties and expanding abilities, our renewed awareness of the importance of collegial support and encouragement, and the implications for future online teaching experiences. Our essay provides an intimate window into our online teaching journeys and captures specific moments we experienced at various stages in the development of our e-instructional practices. The account of our processes of becoming online teacher educators is supported by an interweaving of historical and current literature on pedagogy and e-learning, and serves to address the dearth of research into the processes educators undergo when engaged in online teaching.

Les technologies offertes en ligne sont de plus en plus utilisées et acceptées comme mode d'apprentissage efficace au Canada et dans le monde. Le présent essai décrit une première incursion dans les classes d'enseignement en ligne de trois professeurs de la faculté d'éducation d'une petite université canadienne. Un concepteur de matériel pédagogique et enseignant s'est également joint à l'équipe au cours de la recherche. Cet essai porte sur notre compréhension de l'évolution de nos pratiques pédagogiques parmi les incertitudes initiales et l'acquisition graduelle de nouvelles capacités. Il porte également sur notre prise de conscience de l'importance du soutien et de l'encouragement des pairs, de même que sur les conséquences pour de futures expériences d'enseignement en ligne. Le présent essai constitue une fenêtre intime donnant sur notre expérience d'enseignement en ligne et fait état des moments particuliers que nous avons vécus à diverses étapes de l'évolution de nos pratiques technopédagogiques. La description des processus qui nous ont amenés à devenir des éducateurs enseignant en ligne est étayée par une combinaison de documentation historique et actuelle sur la pédagogie et l'apprentissage en ligne. Cette description vise à combler la pénurie de recherche sur les processus que suivent les éducateurs qui adoptent ce mode d'enseignement.

**Keywords**
e-learning, pedagogy, instructional design, teacher education

Beginnings are often challenging, lending themselves to a telling, a sharing of the experience, and for teachers and teacher educators, for example, beginning a new course is often marked by nervous anticipation. We hope that the stories of our shared beginnings may allow others to find resonance. When teaching online for the first time was proposed to the authors (teacher educators) of this article, each of us experienced a range of emotions.

> *"We have many students who I think would want to take your course this winter if it is offered online." When I heard these words all the excitement of teaching my favourite course drained away. I replied, "No way!!! I cannot teach students I do not see. I have to teach it face to face."* (Ottilia, anecdote, May, 2008)

Ottilia, in the above reflection, captured a beginning moment that defines her pedagogical concerns and the value she places on face-to-face encounters. Teaching online challenged many assumptions for us; in this paper we share our understanding of the evolution in each of our practices, our awareness of the importance of collegial support and encouragement, our stories of initial uncertainties and subsequent growth in our abilities as online instructors, and the implications for future online teaching experiences.

### Inquiring into Lived Experiences as Online Instructors

Our Faculty of Education is in a small Canadian university where much of the graduate teaching happens face-to-face. Students either come to campus or faculty members travel to various locations in Eastern Canada to hold courses. In 2005, three of us (Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew) were asked to teach Master of Education (MEd) courses online using a course management system, BlackBoard™; the fourth author (Wendy) joined our faculty as an instructional designer in 2007. As novice online instructors from 2005 to 2009, through reflective conversations and individually-crafted anecdotes, we considered our online teaching experiences and the collegial support, looking for insights and remaining open to our commonly created meanings. These written anecdotes now provide an intimate link to moments in our online teaching journeys and they capture specific moments we experienced at various stages in developing our online teaching practices.

Through our anecdotes, we discovered that we each felt we had stumbled onto something significant—a means of instruction that was much more than anticipated. These meanings helped us understand more about how we constructed our curricula and our identities as online instructors. The anecdotes revealed a temporality, a movement from the tentative first steps as we began to teach online, through periods of excitement and concern about the possibilities and pitfalls, to our most recent reflections on becoming online instructors. For each of our shared anecdotes, we inquired into its meaning for us as teacher educators, thus uncovering resonances across our experiences and possible implications for other teacher educators delving into online teaching.

**The Need for Instructors' Perspectives on E-learning**

Addressing the personal, practical, and social significance of our inquiry into our experiences as teacher educators engaged in online teaching allowed us to realize how we are shaped as educators. Practicality helps each of us continue to develop as educators; but in the larger social significance of our work, we find that there is less attention placed on the approaches to online teaching than on other forms of instruction. There is little in the literature about how teacher educators experience the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Dalziel (2008) noted:

> …our lack of progress on sharing "pedagogical know-how" among educators. We have systems to run e-learning courses and content to view, but we have not captured the teaching processes that expert educators use to bring learning alive in their e-learning courses. (p. 375)

Furthermore, the processes we undergo in teaching online are evolving and context-dependent, difficult to capture, but worth exploring.

In the virtual world of the Internet, as in face-to-face teaching environments, opportunities emerge to challenge pedagogical assumptions. Dell, Hobbs, and Miller (2008) stressed the importance of effectively integrating teaching theory and practice, which is an ongoing concern in teacher education. In the potential immediacy of the online classroom, participants, including instructors, can "have multiple and ongoing opportunities to make connections between what they learn in their courses and what they do in [their own classrooms]" (Dell et al., 2008, p. 609). The theoretical lenses of constructivism and social cognition, which focus on the importance of contextualizing learning and of rooting that learning in authentic settings (Naidu, 2006), lend themselves to our inquiry. Cragg, Dunning, and Ellis (2008) noted that a social constructivist approach to knowledge development is an effective way to analyze online teaching and learning as a "mutual construction of knowledge" (p. 119), but it is the analysis of the reflective conversations and written anecdotes we undertook in this study that provides a common qualitative understanding.

Although Abrami, Bernard, Wade, Schmid, Borokhovski, Tamin, et al. (2006) reported an over-emphasis on qualitative research in Canadian e-learning, we contend that it is indeed qualitative approaches that serve to shed a comprehensive and reflective light on technology in education. This aligns with the Canadian Council on Learning's (2009) recommendation of "evidence-informed research" (p. 9) in the area of online teaching and learning. In this essay, we address this recommendation and capture our own instructional processes by reflecting upon the successes and challenges we encountered in our online teaching experiences.

**Situating our Experiences within the National Context**

Online technologies extend an institution's ability to deliver courses to students who choose the option of studying at a distance for reasons of convenience, economics, time, and learning style. More and more, post secondary institutions incorporate online courses and programs as part of their curriculum offerings (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). The field has moved beyond a debate of the validity of the process, and literature exists to ground its theories of learning from a student perspective. Yet, as Thompson (2009) observed, "the world's

glaciers are melting faster due to global warming than higher education pedagogy is changing due to social/cultural changes brought on by and/or accelerated by technology" (Msg. 1). Furthermore, as Abrami et al. (2006) reported, Canadian research priorities have not been on e-learning or its impact.

The Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC, 2001) has urged governments and postsecondary institutions to hasten and coordinate their efforts to increase online course offerings. They have recognized the power of online learning to narrow the digital distance between Canadians and recommended processes which promote "quality assurance, transferability, and high technical standards" (p. 85). The Canadian Council on Learning (2009) noted some faculty resistance to online learning and that the shift to online learning is not always smooth. Fein and Logan (2003) explained the transition may be difficult because of the required paradigm shift: "Instructors need to be open-minded and realize that there will be frustrations" (p. 45). This is more easily said than done when the learning experience of students may be at risk.

Throughout the transition to a virtual classroom, Dalziel (2008) argued, instructors should be encouraged and supported to reflect on the changes and emerging issues that impact on their teaching. Our experiences, perhaps influenced by the fact that our instructional designer, Wendy, is a teacher as well, highlight the ways faculty members can integrate their unique teaching practices and styles into their online teaching. In the following section, we explore our reflections on the first courses we taught online as experienced teacher educators, and what we learned.

## Beginning as Online Instructors

In this section, we present our first virtual teaching encounters, learnings from the online class, and unanticipated pedagogical realizations for an online practice. These experiences are transitions to online teaching, based on shared conversations and written reflections, as we supported one another early on. It is evident how the virtual classroom was a space of uncertainty, resulting in the formation of a small, informal learning community for Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew, and then supported by Wendy as online teaching and learning gained acceptance in our Faculty of Education.

### The Faceless Student

When some educators are confronted with the option to teach online, degrees of concern seep in and unsettle their notions of teaching. Why do teachers feel they have to see their students? Is there a sense of connection between people that is more tangible in a face-to-face encounter? After building the first course, Ottilia shared with her colleagues:

> *I still had a bad feeling—how will this work when I do not see the students and have no control of the students? I was panicking. On the first day of class, I quickly realized the students could not even see that I was nervous, instead I relaxed and moved on with the flow of the online river and it worked like magic.* (Ottilia, anecdote, May, 2008)

Ottilia's reflection on her online beginning reveals the anxiety of pre-class jitters—no different, we suspect, than those experienced by most teachers at the beginning of their course in a face-to-face classroom. However, Ottilia reveals that underlying her pedagogical concern are questions about the ability or inability to control and manage her students.

**Login**

The need for control and sense of powerlessness is also evident in Andrew's anecdote in which he recalls similar pre-class jitters. For Andrew, the aspect of control circulated around the uncertainty of the medium—the power technology has over the instructor if all does not unfold as planned. Along with the sense of teaching the faceless student, he was fixated on controlling the technology and his attention did not seem to focus on typical classroom beginnings—developing a community of learners:

> *I checked again for the fourth time. I couldn't trust that* my classroom *would be there; I had to be sure—just one more check. And it was! Were these pre-class jitters? Sort of, but I felt more out there, less in control, on edge, almost panicky—this felt like my first day as a pre-service teacher. I was sitting there, waiting and staring at the Login page.* (Andrew, anecdote, April, 2008)

There is comfort and security in being able to see others. The face is a powerful medium (Levinas, 1969), no less powerful than the computer. However, there is a draw—an enticement—that the digital age offers teachers. Is there a better learning experience because of online technologies? The computer's potential is only beginning to be felt in educational applications, but despite the hardware, software, and abundant flow of information, the power of technology cannot dispel the echoes of doubt that reverberated within Andrew's beginning moments:

> *How would this work? They can't see me or hear me. Why did I agree to this in the first place? I can't type for 3 hours. What if they do not respond to any of my discussion points? I took the advice of a past instructor and made the chat rooms in advance, but that preparation did not leave me at ease—never experiencing a chat other than a phone conversation, I couldn't envision how students would engage in a conversation about social theory. I started the process of the login in—so many passwords! There was those disastrous red letters—Log-in failed. I spiralled into panic! I had to get into my classroom.* (Andrew, anecdote, April, 2008)

Andrew's reflection demonstrates that, despite the innovation and technological wherewithal that backs their efforts, online teachers are no more assured a smooth teaching experience than those in the traditional classroom. Teaching is still a relational encounter; a student and a teacher need to be present (or co-present) and connected in some manner, spoken or unspoken. Writing this reflectively forced Andrew to observe that he was distracted by the online technology, and this interfered with his beginning moments with his virtual classroom.

**Adapting Pedagogy to the Online Environment**

In the classroom, outside the classroom, or in some in-between place—the virtual classroom—one constant is the pedagogical requirement that teachers need to prepare. Hiding from planning is not possible in a virtual world; even if students cannot see their instructors, they still know if they are ready for class. Anne captures the hold preparation has over our instructional lives as she prepared for her online beginning:

> *I planned, prepared, and practiced diligently before teaching my first online class. I was nervous about the technology, but fairly sure I could figure it out. As a teacher educator, my most pressing questions were about how I could re-imagine the dynamic face-to-face classroom of teachers. In a virtual classroom, our only form of communication was typing messages back and forth. I was a lot less sure I could find a way to engage 12 to 16 Master of Education students in three-hour online classes once a week in ways that provided an educative, not a mind-numbingly dry, experience.* (Anne, anecdote, June, 2008)

Regardless of the number of planning hours, the beginning of a course always raises the question whether instructors will create an engaging atmosphere. In the online environment, how will this occur when students cannot see one another or the instructor? In their research, Dell et al. (2008) presented the challenges posed by the perceived notion of geographical and personal isolation afforded by online classrooms. One of these challenges is how to create an engaging environment. Anne took up this challenge, attempting to draw on what she knew worked as a teacher educator to develop student-centred experiences that might allow for connections through conversation and small group tasks:

> *During the synchronous class time, I could have all the students together in a virtual Blackboard classroom for some parts of the class, but I could then send them into small group chat rooms as well. With this tool, I could enable the kinds of small group conversation I value highly in my teaching. I prefer a classroom of actively engaged learners. Perhaps the chat rooms could replicate the scenario of the small group learning centers I often use.* (Anne, anecdote, June, 2008)

As Anne began to teach as an online educator, she carried forward her knowing and applied it to her new setting by adapting face-to-face classroom practices she had used to develop teacher-student relationships.

Wendy recalls her own beginnings with distance education:

> *I had taken a few online courses myself and a few sceptics questioned the validity of what I was doing. They wondered how I could possibly be taught something online. Yet it wasn't the "fill-the-bucket" style of a traditional face-to-face lecture; I was self-learning. I had time to think, to go back to the reading, to read other posts, and carefully craft my response. The discussion*

> *board became the class's record of an evolving understanding. I knew some of the professors were carefully monitoring our dialogue, not encroaching on our debate, but gently pulling us back when we went astray, or adding the odd comment to stir the pot or to re-focus. We were in charge and engaged and we weren't talked at; we talked with each other.* (Wendy, anecdote, June 2008)

Wendy's reflection reminds us that learning and teaching are, as Dell et al. (2008) note, social activities. This conception of learning as socially constructed is one that connects well with the concerns Anne noted around providing a variety of opportunities for student engagement in her online course.

### Pedagogical Possibilities in a Virtual Teaching Experience

As teacher educators and novice online instructors, Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew felt keenly the need for persuasive pedagogical evidence that e-courses could be productive and engaging learning environments. They realized that their online courses could become spaces where students could socially construct meaning from readings and from the interactions that were structured within the synchronous classes supported by the discussion board aspects of the courses.

### Surprises

> *The most notable surprise was the sense of community that was developing among students and me, which I found to be collegial, cohesive, warm, and caring. I could hardly believe this was happening when the only way we were communicating was through text, both synchronously during our once-a-week classes, and asynchronously on the discussion board, as well as through email.*
>
> *The conversation around the readings for the course and the work students shared was sophisticated and of high quality. These cooperative small group sessions were sites of extensive collaboration and thoughtful probing, as students helped one another build on metaphors or clarify ideas. The ways students worked together in this activity impressed me both in terms of how well they worked as a community of learners and in the scholarly abilities shown by many students. I remarked several times to Andrew and Ottilia that I was amazed at how it seems to be possible to build a strong sense of community and to discuss concepts and ideas in considerable depth in an online course. I had not expected either of these outcomes as I began my online teaching journey; I found myself becoming an avid proponent of the virtual classroom as a valid learning space.* (Anne, anecdote, June 2008)

One main concern in teacher education is whether the modelling of practices will foster a pedagogical atmosphere, both in online classes and face-to-face. As confidence grew and technophobia dissipated, optimism seeped into our instructional experiences, fortified by moments of talk in the hallways or doorways of our building, opportunities to support one

another's ideas, share struggles and successes, and, gradually, to realize the pedagogical opportunity in front of us as teacher educators

## Cultivating Meaningful Relationships in Online Courses

In the following anecdote, Ottilia shares a significant moment when she experienced the virtual class spilling out and seeping into the concrete world of the university campus.

> *I quickly realized that teaching online was exciting and a lot of bonding started to develop among the students and me. I never thought I would have such a sense of belonging and community building with my students. The last class was very emotional for both the students and me. I had developed such bonds, more than with my face-to-face classes, to the point where some of my students were typing "I can't believe this is the end, I will miss you all, I feel like crying..."* (Ottilia, anecdote, May 2008)

In Ottilia's reflection is a strong sense of the impact the relationships developed in online courses can have on students and faculty. There is a closeness with one another not always experienced in face-to-face classes. Perhaps this is because we all take that classroom community for granted in face-to-face courses. Perhaps it is because the students and instructors have shared an experience they initially feared and then became competent and comfortable with, a bonding experience, as Ottilia called it.

## Virtual Learning: More than a Slogan

Andrew realized that pedagogical richness is possible in an online teaching experience. Despite the technological distractions, with thoughtful preparation e-teaching can afford relational connections between the teacher and the students—the technology has to be seen as the means to connection, not just an instructional tool.

> *The majority of my thinking and energy for this online course has gone into pedagogical considerations: how my students are doing and the quality of the learning—are they learning and if so, what? I now believe the will to learn can find a way to express itself anywhere if the instructor attends to the climate and expectations are clear. So much of my energies in my prior online classes were hyper-focused on getting the technology to work that I guiltily reflect on whether my past students learned a thing. I hope so, but my pedagogical eye was not where it should have been. Without doubt, the e-learning curve is steep for new instructors like me, but once I made the crest, technology really began to complement what I want to do by creating rich learning experiences that engage and challenge.* (Andrew, anecdote, June 2008)

As Andrew relates in his reflection, a key to the successful integration of any new teaching tool is time to adapt and learn. Another key is the level of support its users have. The Canadian Council on Learning (2009) noted that even though information and computer technologies are

available to use in educational contexts, individuals "require specific skills to use them effectively" (p. 18).

The field of instructional design is not new, but in the online context the instructional designer can be a key support to instructors and students. As a team, the instructional designer and the instructor bring their strengths to the table, but the instructional designer's role is often to de-mystify the technology so the others can get on with teaching and learning. Wendy's reflection on her own learning curve in her role as instructional designer reveals the importance of building a solid foundation of support:

> *I was coming into this story late; Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew knew more about how Blackboard and Elluminate™ worked than I did. I dove in, registered for online information sessions and tutorials and read thousands of pages of technical materials and research. I reviewed class recordings and kept scribble notes on what I saw and heard and thought. I sought advice from Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew. I listened intently and I heard about their own nervousness, their learning curves, but, more importantly, their successes. My goal became one of trying to make sure the e-learning technology didn't get in the way of the teaching and learning for students.* (Wendy, anecdote, June 2008)

Wendy's reflection helps clarify the importance of support for those new to this teaching platform. While Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew were fortunate to develop a small community among themselves as they became online instructors, they recognize the significant amounts of time and commitment required, and how it is preferable to have someone like Wendy in a support position alongside those new to online teaching.

## Advancing Our Practices as Technology Advances

As online teaching practices evolved in positive ways and competencies increased, aided by instructional design and pedagogical support by Wendy, Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew were able to plan, not just for technical competency, but also for enhanced practices. Technology is essential in the instructional mix, but without genuine collaboration and support to try new instructional approaches, the learning experience may not have been as meaningful. The following anecdotes reveal when and how teacher educators can grow and learn as the technology advances and, rather than resisting the change, adapt and enhance their practices over time.

### From the Sledge to a Rocket

Technological advances can change the educational landscape significantly. Part of the success incorporating new technology and tools lies in the rationale, the willingness to change, and the supports needed to make that change. Ottilia tells her story:

> *Elluminate was just like face-to-face! To have a voice, being a moderator, using PowerPoint™, recording classes and being able to replay them. My students were able to see me and I was able to see those who had*

*webcams. The combination of typing and voice is such a great feature of Elluminate as it caters to those who could not type fast. I later realized that a combination of Blackboard and Elluminate as online teaching tools was second to none. It is just like going from travelling on a sledge to travelling on a rocket.*

*Since then, I have taught most of my MEd courses online. It is something I enjoy doing and I cherish the collaboration and support of my colleagues—especially Anne, Andrew, and Wendy. One of the greatest and most important things I learned from my online teaching experience is that teaching is not about control but it is about thorough preparation, facilitating, and guiding the students. When this happens, the learning will take place.* (Ottilia, anecdote, May 2008)

Ottilia vividly relates several shifts that took place from her beginnings as an online instructor. The movement from text-only to voice-capable technology was a change that she, like Anne and Andrew, greeted with cautious optimism. As her reflection indicates, the change was a very welcome one for instructors and students, enabling our graduate program to move from offering a few elective courses online to offering most of the program online, including core courses previously never attempted on this platform. Ottila's willingness to experiment with the new technology with Wendy's support, and to work with Andre and Anne as they subsequently used it, was the key to the success of this shift. Our community of learners was an important factor in advancing our practices. As the next anecdote reveals, however, these advances were not without hiccups.

### Evolution: Change is a Good Thing, Right?

*This was going to be a piece of cake—I talk, they talk—no more typed chat, actual talk. I was so excited to engage in this new platform: hands up feature, web tours, PowerPoint presentations, music, and actual voices—the real thing, an actual student in my classroom—sort of. I felt empowered to be able to use technology to my gain, enhancing the learning environment and we could now cover so much ground. The first 20 minutes taught me a great deal—I needed to develop some real virtual-classroom strategies. My students were all over the place: grabbing the mike and holding on, text messaging one another, doodling on the white screen, and, like kids in the candy shop, sampling any feature they could. I chuckled, for I knew the technology has evolved in leaps and bounds, but good old-fashioned teaching strategies were still the needed feature for the day. Without some virtual structure, these bells and whistles would provide precious little in lending themselves to a learning community. I had to establish control for everyone was talking—doing at once. I was like that classic teacher in the Norman Rockwell picture, but the difference is she did not have the moderator status I did—I just had to figure out how to use it.* (Andrew, anecdote, June 2008)

Wendy began to see another kind of evolution. In meetings with faculty members, as they developed and launched new or existing courses into the virtual realm, the conversations evolved

from ones concerning potential technological pitfalls to ones concerning maximizing resources. She saw this as a significant learning moment:

> *It was almost as if some imaginary hurdle had been jumped. My colleagues were beginning to relax online and were starting to envision the possibilities, rather than to dread the pitfalls. They were no longer trying to make their classroom practice fit into an online environment; instead, they were allowing their orientation to teaching and learning shape the experience. They were placing the learning back into the hands of their students.* (Wendy, anecdote, June 2008)

This was an exciting moment for Wendy, as increasing numbers of teacher educators in this small faculty agreed to try teaching online and became comfortable. Central to socially-constructed learning is the creation of places and spaces in which questioning is encouraged as a way to connect students with the material and the process of learning (Fein & Logan, 2003). As faculty members learned and incorporated an increasing number of collaborative tools and techniques into their online teaching practice, the capabilities of the online learning environment for enabling constructivist learning were becoming evident to them.

## Conclusion

In the graduate program of this small Faculty of Education, we have been part of a big change in the past four years.  The program has shifted from a few elective courses being offered online, to almost all courses coming online, with students filling the virtual seats as quickly as we create them. Consequently, we have had to become proficient with online teaching quite quickly. However, as we discovered the pedagogical benefits of e-learning, we supported and moved toward this approach. Similar to face-to-face classrooms, these include the ability to cultivate a strong sense of community, effective small group possibilities, excellent and responsive partners working on projects together, and the collaborative constructivist learning in our online courses.

The preceding reflections illustrate the critical importance of support and collaboration for novice online instructors. For us, that support came initially from one another, as we informally cultivated a small community, stopping one another in the hallways and popping into each others' offices. Wendy saw the benefits of the relationship Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew had begun to develop, and this strengthened her conviction that working relationally with instructors new to online teaching is critical to their success with this learning platform. In her work as instructional designer, Wendy drew on her own knowledge and experience as a teacher educator and encouraged "conversation between designer and client" (Dicks & Ives, 2008, p. 93). She invited instructors new to online teaching to share narrative descriptions of their previous teaching experiences. In discussing design rationale, instructors new to online teaching benefit from making links between what they already know as educators and this new teaching environment. As in the example of Ottilia, Anne, and Andrew, the potential exists for a community of learners to develop among faculty who are new to e-learning, in which conversations serve to advance personal and professional learning, and, subsequently, improve the learners' experiences as well (Dalziel, 2008).

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