

WRITING PROFESSOR AS ADULT LEARNER: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a study of the author's experiences taking a six-week, asynchronous, online, faculty development class for educators at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Using autoethnography methods, the author details her learning and the ways her experiences support adult learning theories. Implications of this research suggest that adult learning theories should also be applied to faculty development experiences because faculty are more likely to benefit from online faculty development if they are given the opportunity to direct the course of their development to suit their own needs.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography; adult learning theories; faculty development; online learning

I. INTRODUCTION

A piece of advice commonly offered about teaching online is that whenever possible, instructors should take an online course themselves [1, 2, 3, 4]. As an experienced face-to-face teacher who until recently had never been an online student, this advice strikes me as sound. In my case, however, I did not have the opportunity to take an online course until after I had taught online twice. This paper offers an investigation of the benefits that taking an online professional development course can have for experienced postsecondary faculty members like myself. Before conducting such an investigation, however, it is important to offer some background information about myself as a professor.

I have been teaching writing in face-to-face settings for well over twenty years and have earned tenure and promotion to associate professor by doing this work. The range of undergraduate writing courses I teach include first-year writing as well as courses in business and technical writing that prepare students for their careers. A large component of technical and business writing courses includes work in computer labs where I assist students in making use of a range of electronic resources to support writing, document design, research, peer learning, and group projects. I am at that point in my career where I feel comfortable in the face-to-face classroom and enjoy taking some risks to explore new technology and its potential in helping students succeed in the classroom and beyond.

In addition to teaching writing courses, I occasionally teach courses about how to teach writing at both the undergraduate and graduate level for grades 6 through 12 teachers. At the graduate level, I am required to offer this course in an online, asynchronous format using Desire2Learn (D2L). These requirements largely stem from the fact that the students who enroll in the graduate program are nearly all adult learners and practicing teachers. Their busy lives and sometimes limited access to fast Internet connections are best accommodated by asynchronous work via a platform that works even on slow, dial-

up connections. I taught such a course in the spring semesters of 2009 and 2011 before taking an online faculty development course.

Even though I was not able to take an online course before teaching online in the graduate program for the first time, I did take advantage of other professional development opportunities such as face-to-face workshops, informal teaching circles, and one-to-one, face-to-face tutoring regarding technical aspects of D2L. In addition, I completed a range of independent activities including reading about teaching online and watching online videos.

In June 2011, after teaching online twice, I took a six-week, asynchronous online class on designing effective online courses. What follows is a consideration the obstacles common to faculty development and online teaching, a review of the ways adult learning theories can help faculty developers address these obstacles, an autoethnography that details the ways my online faculty development experience relates to faculty development, online teaching, and adult learning theories, and a conclusion that considers the implications of this study.

II. FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND ADULT LEARNING THEORIES

Before discussing the autoethnography's results, it is first important to consider the obstacles that challenge faculty development as they transition to online teaching. It is also useful to consider the ways adult learning theories can be particularly relevant in developing satisfying faculty development courses that help faculty to address these obstacles. It goes almost without saying that individuals who complete faculty development experiences, even if they do so as graduate students, are adults. As adult learners, these individuals are likely self-directed; have rich resources of life experience and knowledge for learning; are motivated to learn as it relates to their social roles; and prefer knowledge that they can immediately apply to their own situations [5]. To develop these points, this section will consider the obstacles faculty face when making the transition to online instruction and then discuss four adult learning theories that faculty developers can use to offset those obstacles.

A. Obstacles that Challenge Faculty Development

Developing faculty for online teaching is inherently challenging because it requires faculty members to be willing to change their "teaching paradigm" [3, p. 65]. Faculty need to be open to the fact that effective online teaching may require them to change their role from that of expert to facilitator [1, 3, 4, 6], work at times outside a nine-to-five, five-day work week to meet student needs [1, 3, 4, 7, 8], learn how to teach effectively despite the absence of verbal and visual cues [1, 3, 9, 10], and learn to use technology in pedagogically sound ways [1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 12, 13].

In addition to being open to change, faculty need help overcoming deterrents to their development [14]. For instance, in studies about what fails to motivate faculty with respect to online teaching, O'Quinn and Corry and Schifter all note that faculty are concerned about how online teaching will increase their workload and whether or not online teaching leads to quality learning [9, 11]. In addition, faculty express concerns about the lack of release time and lack of monetary and technological support [9, 11]. Moreover, faculty often worry that online teaching may interfere with their ability to earn promotion and tenure [15, 16], and they express anxiety that teaching online will take more time; time that they already do not have to meet their current research and teaching obligations [16, 17, 18].

Even when faculty overcome obstacles related to expertise and time, some researchers note that isolation can undermine online faculty members' long-term motivation. Robinson and Smelser-Gackler both note their personal feelings of isolation as teachers new to online instruction [19, 20], and Childers and Berner's study explains that the support structures that face-to-face faculty members have access to such as faculty associations and student clubs are typically less developed or absent from online learning [21]; a fact that exacerbates the problem of faculty isolation.

Effectively engaging faculty who are wrangling with these cognitive (i.e., concerns related to the paradigm shift online teaching requires) and material (i.e., concerns related to time, work load, money,

and rewards) obstacles is a daunting task, but research does suggest that if faculty have some intrinsic desire to learn or to improve student learning, positive faculty development experiences can make these challenges less burdensome for faculty. For instance, both McKenzie and Schifter note that faculty desires to use technology and be innovative can motivate them to develop online teaching skills [11, 12] while Crumpacker and McKenzie found that meeting student needs for online learning can also be a strong motivator for faculty [12, 13]. When motivated faculty receive adequate training, Crumpacker suggests that the previously described obstacles can be minimized [13] while Lee notes that faculty satisfaction in teaching online often increases after such experiences [7].

B. Engaging Adult Learning Preferences in Faculty Development Courses

Creating satisfying faculty development experiences requires developers to be sensitive to the aforementioned obstacles that faculty must overcome as well as the unique characteristics faculty possess as learners. Adult learning theories, which the field of adult education has been developing, can help illuminate these important traits.

Adult education became an official discipline in the 1920s with the first studies on how adults learn coming out at about that time [22]. When online learning began growing in the 1990s, adult education again became an area of interest when it was discovered by Moore and Kearsley in 1996 that the majority of online learners were between the ages of 25 and 50 [23]. As this conversation about adult learners as online learners continues to develop, Cercone contends that four theories can be of particular use to designers of online environments in engaging adult learning preferences: andragogy, self-directed learning, experiential learning, and transformative learning [24].

1. Adult Learning Preferences and the Theory of Andragogy

Malcolm Knowles is frequently credited with developing the theory of andragogy (i.e., a theory of pedagogy that focuses on the best way to teach adults) [24, 25, 26, 27, 28]. Knowles bases his theory on four assumptions about adult learners that he has developed through experience and reviewing the literature on adult education [5]. Knowles assumes that as people mature they: (1) become more “self-directed;” (2) gain more experience which can be a “resource for learning;” (3) are motivated to learn when that learning relates to their “social roles;” and (4) desire the “immediate application” of learning [5, p. 45].

Scholars who have worked to more fully develop Knowles’s theory are careful to point out that Knowles’s assumptions do not work for all adults [24, 25, 29, 30], and Knowles himself is quick to note that these are tendencies that develop over time [5]. When considering Knowles’s first assumption, Fidishun points out, for instance, that those adults who have traditional, formal schooling backgrounds may be less independent as learners simply because traditional schooling methods have tended to place students in passive roles [29]. Fidishun, Lieb, Cercone, and Stine all assert that adult learners may need some pedagogical assistance in becoming more independent and self-directed [24, 25, 29, 30].

On the other hand, scholars are largely in agreement that Knowles’s other three assumptions are readily observable in adult education. Adults do want to bring the experiences that they already have to new learning situations. Fidishun, Lieb, Kolb, Lynch, and Stine all make mention of the ways that adults find past experience an important resource for learning [3, 25, 29, 30, 31]. However, for both Lynch and Stine, this desire can be problematic when it comes to using technology [3, 25]. Lynch notes that if faculty are already troubled by not having enough time and support for their other duties, the added burden of learning new technology can be overwhelming [3] while Stine notes that if past experiences with technology have been frustrating, adults may be reluctant to try using that technology again in the future [25].

In addition to their desire to bring past learning to bear on new learning, adults also want that learning to be relevant to their social roles and immediately applicable [5]. Knowles and Lieb both suggest that adult learners are goal driven, and if those goals can be tied to what adults need to perform well in their social roles, then they will be motivated to learn [5, 30]. Merriam and Cercone also agree that learning needs to

be related to adults' social roles [22, 24]. Lieb argues that helping adults see how their learning can be applied to their lives is important in meeting this need for relevancy and immediacy [30].

2. Amplifying the Theory of Andragogy with Three Other Adult Learning Theories

While andragogy is useful in helping faculty developers consider how adult learners are different from other learners, Cercone contends that three other adult learning theories have added to the characteristics of learners developed by andragogy and are worth mentioning briefly if one wishes to understand adult learning [24]. These theories include: experiential learning, self-directed learning, and transformative learning [24].

In his theory of andragogy, Knowles mentions the importance of adults learning through experiences by linking prior knowledge and current learning together through reflection [5]. Others have built on this work emphasizing the importance of viewing adults' prior learning and experience as a resource [24, 27, 28] and noting the need to remember that learning happens in context with the learner making connections among the present, past, and future [26, 32]. To engage learners in experiential learning in the online classroom, Cercone stresses the importance of treating the learner as an "equal" [24, p. 158], incorporating opportunities for interacting with other learners, self-reflection and assessment, and inviting learners to apply their past experiences in discussions of course material [24].

In addition to experiential learning, self-directed learning is another central concept in adult education [24] that puts the learner in control of his or her learning [24, 33]. These learners are independent, like to take the initiative, are persistent, disciplined, confident, and want to learn [24]. They are also willing to learn in a range of environments from informal to formal [32] and use goal-directed behaviors to organize their time in reaching their goal [24]. Fostering self-directed learning requires instructors who are willing to act as facilitators who put learners in charge of their own learning and foster interaction among class members and themselves [1, 2, 3, 24].

A final theory to consider is the theory of transformative learning. Cercone credits Mezirow with significantly influencing the development of transformative learning with his proposal that individuals can transform by changing how they perceive the world [24, 34]. The goal of this kind of learning, then, is for the learner to understand how he or she views the world and to consider ways the constraints of that perspective can be overcome [34, 35]. Transformative learning is akin to the paradigm shifting [3] that face-to-face teachers must do as they make the transition to online teaching and learning. This kind of learning requires reflection [36] and results in an independent learner who can critically "negotiate his or her values, meanings, and purposes" [34, p. 11]. As with the other kinds of learning, this kind of learning also requires instructors to act as facilitators and incorporate strategies such as peer interaction, self-reflection and self-assessment in their classes.

C. Synthesizing Adult Learning Theory and Online Faculty Development

So far this paper has considered both the challenges faculty must overcome in their development as online teachers as well as the rudiments of four adult learning theories. Now it is important to consider how these two strands of literature are related and what they suggest about the professional development of faculty vis-à-vis online, asynchronous instruction.

To make these connections, it is first useful to consider again what conclusions can be drawn from each of these bodies of literature. By considering the obstacles in the development of faculty for online teaching, one can conclude that faculty need both motivation [5, 11, 12, 13] and positive faculty development experiences [7, 13] to overcome the cognitive (i.e., concerns related to paradigm shift online teaching requires) and material challenges (i.e., concerns related to time, work load, money, and rewards) associated with online teaching. A consideration of adult learning theories suggests that adults learn best in environments that are respectful to their experiences, offer immediately applicable learning relevant to their social roles, and make use of experiential, self-directed and transformative learning theories that connect to adults' needs for independence [5, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34].

When combined, the conclusions developed from these two sets of literature suggest that adult learning

theories can offer faculty developers the means for constructing meaningful faculty development experiences that directly address the needs of faculty preparing for online teaching. Motivating faculty to face and overcome the challenges with respect to their own development is connected to keeping learning relevant to the learner's social role and immediate needs [5, 22, 24, 30]. Moving faculty to paradigm shift [3] to facilitative roles requires a blend of experiential [5, 24, 27, 28, 32], self-directed [24, 33], and transformative learning [34, 35, 36] to yield the kinds of independence and critical thinking needed as faculty develop and continue to develop as online teachers. In a nutshell, then, adult learning theories suggests strategies that faculty developers can adopt to develop meaningful, online faculty development experiences.

III. METHODOLOGY

Now that connections between adult learning theories and faculty development challenges have been established, this paper can move forward and consider how my learning in an online, asynchronous, faculty development course relates to these themes. Before considering my experiences, however, it is first important to discuss the purpose of this study, its methodology, and its method of analysis.

A. A Description of the Study's Purpose

This study asks: what can a seasoned, face-to-face teacher and occasional online teacher learn by taking an online course? This autoethnography will be especially sensitive to my preferences as an adult learner and my own desire to use learning to interact with others. By focusing on these dimensions, this autoethnography will illustrate how taking an online course helped me to better understand the needs of adult learners -- needs to which I should remain sensitive as I continue teaching online.

B. A Description of the Method of Autoethnography

Since readers may not be familiar with the method of autoethnography, it is important to offer some description of this method and its merits. In an autoethnography, the researcher is the "phenomenon under investigation" [37, p. 1]; her experiences and stories are the "focus of inquiry" [37, p. 2]. Such a methodology usually consists of the researcher's narrative in which she attempts to give the reader a "sense of feel and place" [38, p. 79] and also offers some analysis of how these events transformed the researcher [37, 39]. It is a methodology that is inherently self-reflective and as such is a method that practicing teachers can use to enhance both their own professional development and that of others because this reflection helps both the researcher and reader view the practice of teaching and learning "through different lenses" [40, p. xii-xiii]. By sharing both the researcher's own story and reflections, a good autoethnography can act as a transformative experience for both the researcher and the reader [39].

In addition to the transformation it can invoke, autoethnography can also provide important insights about the ways the self connects with others through the medium of culture which can be defined as both a set of observable patterns and behaviors and as a perspective an individual develops to define him or herself [39]. It is also important to note that individuals often belong to more than one culture so often have multiple perspectives for self-definition [39]. For instance, both how others define me as an English professor or an online professor or an American or a woman and how I define (or redefine) myself via these identities constitute examples of cultures by which and through which I connect with others. Given my research question's focus on teaching and learning one can expect my autoethnography to make some connections between myself and the culture of education.

C. A Description of the Method of Analysis Used by this Autoethnography

To reveal concrete connections between the self and others and thereby offer a glimpse of cultures, autoethnography collects data about both the self and others. In collecting data about the self, researchers make use of memories, recorded self-observations, and recorded self-reflections [37, 38, 39]. When they are able to do so in an ethical manner, researchers also try to supplement that self-generated data some kind of "external data" such as interviews or textual artifacts [39]. The autoethnography offered here

makes use of my memories, self-observations and reflections and textual artifacts (emails and discussion posts) to consider my learning in an online course.

Like any autoethnography this one uses ethnographic methods [39] to interpret the collected autobiographical data. Specifically, I searched my memories, my field journal, class discussion posts, and emails for recurring themes in my online learning, important anomalies or one time occurrences (such as a computer crash and a bad summer storm) that had significant impact on my learning, and evidence of the ways interactions with others impacted my learning. Furthermore, I used my understanding of both adult learning theories and faculty development issues to frame my self-reflections as connecting autobiographical data to other literature is good way to avoid an excessive focus on the self, which can be a pitfall of this kind of study [39]. Finally, to assure that this autoethnography follows the ethical standards common to ethnographic research, aside from my own name, all other names used in the autoethnography have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect the identity of the faculty and students.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The autoethnography that follows begins by establishing links between the research subject and the culture of the online class by generally describing the social roles that shaped the identities of the class members and the research subject. After contextualizing the research subject culturally, the study focuses on describing key themes in the subject's learning that relate to obstacles in online faculty development and adult learning theories. These themes include: the research subject's desire to stay in control of her learning, tensions surrounding her desire to combat isolation by interacting with others, and her eventual willingness to be self-directed in overcoming frustration.

Description of the Class and its Members

An important feature of any autoethnography is establishing a link between the research subject and the subject's social context and culture [38, 39]. To that end, I will begin my autoethnography by offering some brief background about myself and the social context of the online class.

In June 2011, I took ED 590: Designing Online Instruction for free as an auditor of the course. This opportunity was offered to anyone on my campus interested in pursuing more training in teaching online. In addition, the course was also populated by students taking the class for credit as part of coursework for a Master's in Education. Auditors were not required to write the papers, but we were encouraged to complete the reading and participate in the weekly discussion posts. A total of 31 students enrolled in the course and at least 12 of us were auditors. Of those 12 auditors at least 8 of us were from the same university campus. However, since the course took place in the summer when we were all away from campus we did not interact face-to-face. Most of the students were either secondary teachers or post-secondary faculty from a range of disciplines. At least two of the students were information technology staff members at a university.

The course included a range of activities, but as an auditor, I only participated in the discussions. Two different types of discussions were made available during the course. The first I refer to as informal discussions, which occurred in one of three forums: a coffee shop forum where students could chat about anything, a pre-course forum where students could reflect on the advantages of contacting students before the start of an online course, and a question-and-answer forum where students could raise questions about the course. The second type of discussions I refer to as formal discussions. These discussions occurred every week in reference to topics and readings being covered in the course. Typically, three discussion forums were available each week. Students were required to make primary posts to their choice of two of those forums.

It is also important to note that while the class had an official start date of June 6, 2011, the instructor of the class was in contact with students in March regarding the course, the syllabus, and the textbook, so I started journaling about the course on that date. What follows are the results of an autoethnography that spans dates from March 2011 to July 2011.

A. Pre-Course Concerns about the Learner “Staying in Control”

Because adult learners are self-directed [5] and have full lives [24, 25], they like to stay in control of their learning [24, 33]. Before even enrolling in the course, I found that I, too, had concerns about control. As the following journal entries and email demonstrate, I was most concerned about controlling my time by getting the textbook early and completing the reading prior to the course. This strategy became complicated when an unforeseen change in the textbook had to be made. That change turned desire for control into a momentary fear of losing control.

1. March 15, 2012: Signing Up for the Course

I signed up for an online course about teaching online today. I was nervous about doing it because it requires a six-week commitment this summer when I am not under contract to work. My husband and I usually travel to visit family in the summer, but we haven't made our plans yet, so I am worried the course will interfere. However, we both agree that this is an opportunity I cannot pass up as the course is free and fits beautifully with my sabbatical project. I hope the course will motivate me to start the reading and research for my project early. To help with that, I also ordered the textbook for the course online from the publisher. I was glad to receive the textbook information so early. Maybe I can have the book read before the class starts!

2. May 9, 2012: Textbook Change

Rats! I just heard from the teacher of our online course. The book I ordered and am half way through is backordered so there aren't enough copies for the class. She has asked us to offer an opinion on what to do. She would like to switch books to one she knows is available. I have mixed feelings. From what she told us in the email, this problem really isn't her fault as the publisher assured her there were enough copies. This kind of thing could happen to any of us as professors. It happened to me once and completely threw off the first three weeks of the semester. Anyway, I emailed her that I could stand a change in textbooks even though it would stress me out. Here's what I said in my email:

Hi, “Sara,”

I have already ordered my book and have started reading it. If you have to change, I will understand though I will have mixed feelings and will likely stress about getting the book in time for the course. My husband and I will have to be out of town this week, and I don't like to order anything until we get back. Our mail will be on hold, but we won't be able to have anyone pick up other kinds of packages for us. I know none of this is really your problem, and I would hope that if I order the book on the 17th it would arrive by the 7th.

Yours,
Teresa

3. May 17, 2012: New Textbook is Ordered

I ordered the new book, *Essential Elements (EE)* today and it shipped today. I should still be able to have the whole thing read before the class starts. I know it is weird to worry about that, but I thought if I could read the whole text, I could more easily do the course and still fit in summer activities with my husband and family. Again, I am glad to have such early contact with the professor.

4. May 24-26: New Textbook is Read and Assessed

Received and read *EE*; was troubled by book's presupposition that online teaching is largely beneficial and advantageous [1]; also focus of book is for content courses and not “doing” courses like a writing course. I had hoped to see more of a pro/con focus and more specific examples from a range of courses. Perhaps that aspect will be discovered/covered when the course begins.

B. Pre-Course Concerns about Interacting with Others in the Course

Several scholars have noted that faculty new to online teaching sometimes struggle with feelings of

isolation [19, 20, 21]. Similarly, other scholars have noted that adult learners can also suffer from feelings of isolation [2, 3, 4, 8, 25, 41]. To overcome these feelings both faculty and adult learners crave and can benefit from interactions with others [24, 25, 41]. My early journal entries also follow this pattern by reflecting a desire for interaction. However, in my case, that desire for interaction is tempered by fear when I discovered I would be interacting with classmates who had connections with my supervisors on the job. Finding a way to trust others in the course was a continuing issue for me.

1. May 23: Setting Up Course Picture and Profile Page

Set up password for online course, reviewed syllabus and unit one materials, played around with student profile info. such a picture and agonized over what details about self to share with others. I reviewed the “classlist” and see that I do not know some classmates as yet. Also some classmates are people who are close to some of my supervisors. I had filled out the fields about favorite books, movies, quotes, and music and then erased it all after seeing the classlist as I am not sure how personal I want to be with others that I have to take on professional roles with; I was surprised to see someone use a profile picture with drink in hand. . . I stuck with the picture that is already public on my school’s website – simple head shot. Some aren’t using pictures at all or completing any info – I wonder if they have the same concerns or just figure we know them anyway so don’t need pictures.

2. May 31-June 1: Drafting Discussion Posts

Drafted first three posts for online course but did not post them yet; feel concern about being the first to post as I am not taking course for grade and don’t know how long the posts should be or how I should address the class in the post. Should the posts read like papers or letters to others? Am tempted to consider them informal letters to the class as would like some community with peers but peers may not want to commune with me.

3. June 2: Making First Pre-Course Discussion Post

The class does not begin until Monday, but I did take advantage of the pre-course discussion that was set up. Mine is the only post so far. I did draft and then revise. I probably considered my answer a bit more carefully that I would have in a F2F class. I went with the informal letter approach as that is how I do my posts when I teach online and students gave be positive feedback about that at the end. Hopefully, that approach will work as a “student” too.

4. June 6: Making First “Real” Discussion Posts

Online class began. I went in to post my discussion posts at 9 a.m. I agonized that I would be the first to post when 9 had already posted. I wrote and re-wrote my first posts which surprised me. I also spent a lot of time thinking about my ideas and how to convey them to the class.

C. Continuing Concerns About Interacting With Peers

Peer learning is often advocated for both adult learners [4, 25, 27, 41] and for faculty taking professional development courses [14, 24, 42] to decrease isolation and allow students to learn from the rich experiences that their classmates bring to the classroom. Online discussions are often used to encourage such peer learning and interaction [2, 4, 43, 44]. In the entries that follow, one can see the emotional struggles I had in accepting peer learning as an efficient and effective way to develop my online teaching skills. One can also see that like many adult learners, I also wanted an almost immediate application of learning [3, 5, 24, 25].

1. June 7-8: Interacting with Peers Takes Time

Online class is taking a lot of my time. I am reading all posts and now responding when I feel like it or when a question directly pertains to me. I am already over the 3 hours/week instructor said I could expect to spend. My own students raised some issues on the course eval. about reading all posts. It does take time. I will be sure to warn them about it. Also, discussion kind of dies out at mid-week.

2. June 9: Peer Learning Creates Desire for Application of Learning

I also posted to the course discussion boards today and read the discussions. I learned about audio and eportfolio features of D2L (they are new). I long for a good demonstration of these tools in addition to the discussion with the class.

3. June 10: Peer Learning Begins to be Valued

Did more discussion work for online class. Have now posted what is due for week two. Learned about D2L and Youtube videos. Learned from a classmate about the DIY [Do It Yourself] degree movement which uses free, creative commons work to guide learners along their desired DIY path; free and open education is their mantra. I feel sympathy for the movement but like to be paid for what I do. . .hmmm

4. June 13: Sharing Work with Peers is a Struggle

Did more discussion work for online class. Have emailed “Sara” back and forth about exporting a D2L survey for her to share with the class. Feel ambivalent about sharing. It is my hard work and someone else will have the benefit of using. Am feeling ambivalent about online class. It is mostly all discussion with occasional input from teacher. Some ok to good learning from the others, but I now think that if you only have one or two advanced learners in a class, they won’t get much from the course. Am worried that discussion approach could be a race to middle for my first-year class and maybe even for my graduate students should I ever get a group with little teaching experience. I also notice that the majority of auditors are not participating which makes me a little reluctant to share. I never realized before how trust might continue to be an issue for my own students as we continue with a peer learning approach throughout the length of a course.

D. Emotional Concerns Challenge Engaged and Self-Directed Learning

While exactly how emotions impact the learning of adults in an online course is not a phenomenon that has been well studied [26], research does suggest that frustration can challenge traditional aged college students’ abilities to learn in an online setting and can even cause these students to drop the course [25, 27, 41]. From my own experience, I would add that I also found myself struggling to stay engaged and self-directed in the face of some relatively minor frustrations – some of which were of my own making.

1. June 14: Learner Frustration when Technology Fails

Frustrated. “Sara” still can’t open my zip file and tech support isn’t sure why the file won’t open. I have offered to upload the survey to an existing course shell that “Sara” can access, but I will need tech support to give me instructor access to that site. I am proud of self for coming up for this solution myself but don’t like to wait for the access to happen. I am now finding email a horribly inefficient way to deal with these kind of minor tech issues. If I were on campus, I could walk down to the tech center and be done.

I am also sorry I didn’t take the course for a grade because none of my work is being assessed and I now realize it would have been good for me to see how another online teacher does assessment and also be reminded of how assessment feels. Right now I feel like I’m not getting what I should from the course and wonder if I should also try a DIY course, free, online. Same principle – everyone discusses a book – which is largely what I feel I am doing in this course.

2. June 15: Learner Expresses Frustration that Discussion Fails to Apply to Her

Checked in on online course discussion. Not getting much out of it this week. A debate has started about whether or not it is best for teachers to provide students the whole calendar for a course. My frustration is that I have been teaching for a long time so don’t find this conversation interesting any longer. Maybe I also don’t want to change. I provide the whole calendar so students can plan their lives. I have consistently received praise from students for letting them know early what is going on.

3. June 16-17: Learner Expresses Frustration when She Feels Ignored

I have posted my survey to another course “Sara” can access, but she emailed me that she is out of town

so survey I posted cannot be viewed by her or shared with the class yet. I have to admit that I had a student reaction. I felt, heck, why should I have bothered? I know that reaction is not fair as I go out of town for conferences too and have not been able to access my course out of town during the day I travel. I wonder if there is any good way to make it clear to students that they should not expect 24/7 access to their instructor (as I have clearly come to expect). Is there a good way to do that but still make the student feel important?

The only other work I have done has been to read the discussion posts of others. I also had a student reaction in that a post I made to someone about using the assessment feature of the discussion feature in D2L to keep track of student posts in an online course was repeated by others who gave no credit to me. I guess it is no big deal, but I hate when my stuff doesn't get read or remembered. It makes me feel like I am just writing to myself. When I teach, I know it is really important to reinforce the good posts of others in the class. I realize that I, too, crave that reinforcement as a student but it seems I crave it from other students. For me, this all raises the question, how can I make sure my students interact with each other in such a way that everyone feels like they are being heard?

E. Learner Use Self-Direction to Overcome Frustration

Adults learners can be self-directed [5] when they act independently, take the initiative, and are persistent disciplined, confident, in pursuing their learning goals [5, 24, 33]. And, as noted earlier, fostering these self-directed tendencies requires instructors who are willing to act as facilitators who put learners in charge of their own learning and foster interaction among class members and themselves [1, 3, 24]. As an adult learner, I found that I, too, had these self-directed tendencies when I remembered to focus on my learning goals. The entries that follow demonstrate how I started to act in a more independent manner to make the course a better fit for my needs and personal life.

1. June 20: Learner Adjusts Length and Format of Discussion Posts

I wrote and posted my two online discussion responses. They are much shorter than the ones earlier in the course. "Sara" has noted that we don't have to respond to every question. Others typically write one paragraph maybe two. I'm thinking my longer posts may be contributing to my feeling of not being heard. I'm trying to do a better job of being concise and of using bullets and headings within the post.

2. June 21-24 and 28: Learner Controls Pace of Learning

I hoped to do work on the online class a little early so as to have the 4th free for family. The discussions were to have been open but weren't, so I let "Sara" know. The problem was fixed by the 28th and I got my work done early. I was a little frustrated by having to wait, but I also know how easily these technical glitches can occur. Also, "Sara" posted my survey on Friday. In all, it took us three weeks to sort that one out, so I don't even feel bad about sharing as I once did. I am relieved we got the technology figured out. I do still find myself craving more practical examples that relate to only the teaching of writing, but again, I know that is not the class I signed up for; it is simply the class I want.

F. Minor Tragedies Connect Learner to Others

As noted earlier, both faculty who are new to online teaching and adult learners can fall prey to feelings of isolation that can disrupt their learning [19, 20, 21]. To overcome these feelings both faculty and adult learners crave and can benefit from interactions from others [24, 25, 41]. I found that these feelings of isolation can become stronger when facing minor tragedies outside the online classroom, and I also found that interacting with others really did put me more at ease and help me not feel so alone.

1. July 5: Learner Connects with Teacher and Class over Storm

I am feeling terribly guilty. I just saw an email from "Sara" reminding the class to participate in the discussions. No one has posted anything. I'm usually an early poster, but we had a terrifying storm on July 1 that we are still recovering from. Neighbors and family all unhurt but lots and lots of tree damage. We lost the big pine tree -- cut in half by neighbor's tree. Three other trees with big limbs down and hail

dents in garage and siding. We spent all day July 2 and 3 clearing trees and putting what destruction we could to rights before having family over for the 4th. I am exhausted by all the yard work. Now we have to deal with the insurance company and contractors for home repairs. The whole town is damaged so getting work done in a timely fashion is going to be an issue.

Anyway, I emailed “Sara” to let her know about the storm and that I would get to posting later in the week. Her response back was nice. She hoped we were not too badly affected by the storm. She also posted to the announcement page of our course something about the storm so the class would know about what those of us in Marshall are dealing with. Several class members hoped we were all well and asked if there was anything they could do to help. I feel like this storm has brought me closer to the others in the class.

2. July 11: Learner Crashes Computer

I am actually typing this entry on July 12. Right after making my last posts to the course on July 11, I did a required Windows update which crashed my computer. I could not believe it. I hear from students all the time about computer crashes, usually when something is due, and I don’t really believe them. And here I am a student in an online course and I crashed my computer. The only good news is that I was using my campus issued laptop for the course which means the tech center was able to give me a loaner laptop until they fix mine. But of course I hadn’t backed up all the files (I do that every Friday), so talk about stress! The tech center has been able to get my work off the hard drive so I was very lucky. I have so much more respect for those folks now that this happened. I wish my online students were closer to campus so they could work with the tech center when they crash their machines. They came up with solutions quickly so I have been able to read the last discussion posts for the course and complete the course evaluation.

G. A Summary of Learner Reflections Then and Now

Most good autoethnographies end with summary reflections from the researcher [37, 38, 39]. I would like to deviate from that approach slightly by offering both the summary reflection I made as my last discussion post in the course and then follow that with fuller reflections I have come to as a result of reviewing my journal entries and course work for this paper.

1. Then: Learner Reflections at the End of the Course

One of the choices for formal discussion during the last week of the course included a forum where students could discuss what they had learned at the end of the course and where they wanted to go next. In my post, I focus on what I learned from reading the course textbook to the exclusion of the learning I reported in my journal. In the discussion post that follows, I mention the course textbook and for the purposes of this article have added the endnote reference [1] which did not appear in the post I did for the class. Here’s what I wrote:

Hi, Everyone,

I think that by far the most important aspect I have gained from the course has been the knowledge of the 17 essential elements. These elements give me a clear cut means for reflecting on what I am doing well as an online teacher and where I still need to improve.

From this course, I have learned that my strengths as an online teacher include:

- Building a course outline [1];
- Creating a course schedule with clear deadlines [1];
- Formatting my course so students can focus on content – or in my case focus on writing [1];
- Recognizing that pacing in an online course is different [1];
- Facilitating discussions in a way that keeps students on-task, promotes full participation, and encourages peer collaboration [1].

This course has also made me recognize some essential elements where I may want to focus more of my attention.

- First, I would like to enhance “plans for quality assurance” [1] by adding a pre-course survey to my class.
- Second, I would like to learn to use the rubric tool in D2L to communicate my standards to students rather than using a Word document in the content area.
- Third, I need to continually add to my personal library of course materials [1] to make sure that students are always getting updated and rich content [1].

To sum up, I think having criteria that I can use to measure my own work as an online teacher gives me more confidence about teaching online while also encouraging me to be more critical of my online work and to keep learning from online teachers and students.

Yours,

Teresa

In reviewing this post now, I question why I focused only on the course reading. Did I focus my post in this manner to help me keep it concise and readable? Did I focus just on the reading to keep the post professional and safe because I was still having problems fully trusting my peers? Or was this post simply indicative of the fact that the last thing I remember doing in the course was reviewing the course text? Were those ideas simply the freshest? In looking back, I am really not sure what the true answer is, but after reviewing my journal, I can say that I am a little troubled that my final reflection only captured what I learned from reading and not what I learned from others and about myself by taking an online, asynchronous class.

2. Now: Additional Learner Reflections

In addition to reflecting on what I learned from the reading, I would like to now offer some reflections regarding what I learned from others and about myself from taking my first online class by considering whether I achieved any transformative learning [24, 34, 35]. Three areas stand out to me as significant to consider: issues of control, overcoming frustration, and handling issues of authority.

a. Issues of Control and Staying Open to Learning

I see that I have a strong desire to control my own learning and time by working ahead. That desire makes it hard for me to understand why other learners might not want the whole syllabus in advance and thus made the class discussion regarding that issue seem less relevant to me when in fact it was probably a discussion I needed so I could develop sympathy for learners unlike me. By not attending to this discussion as I should have, I may have missed an important opportunity for transformative learning. These insights suggests to me that educators who work with adult learners must consider ways of helping the learner stay open to insights that might be contrary to their own beliefs and experiences.

b. Being Self-Directed in Overcoming Frustration

While my lack of openness to at least one important discussion caused me to miss a transformative opportunity, I think I did come to some important transformative insights about learner frustration and self-direction. I recognize that I get very frustrated unless learning directly applies to my situation, but I am also pleased to see that I can draw on my experiences as a learner and teacher to counter the causes of those frustrations. In learning this about myself, however, I do worry that in the online classes I teach that not all learners have enough experience to address their frustrations themselves. I want to be sure these learners are able to communicate these frustrations to me so that I can help them address their concerns and they can keep learning rather than give up on the learning.

c. Accounting for the Dimension of Authority in Peer Learning

In addition to developing some transformative insights about frustration, my experience in the course also helped me better understand why students may resist and not always be comfortable with peer learning. I

realize that like other adult learners I do want to connect with others, but I also find those connections to be somewhat uncomfortable. Throughout the course, I was very sensitive to how some of my peers had access to avenues of authority that I did not have vis-à-vis my position at my home institution. As such, peer learning was not completely successful in helping me learn and meet my desire for community because I did not always feel comfortable being completely honest or open about my online teaching experiences. As someone who relies heavily on peer learning in her teaching, this insight has been especially transformative for me. I realize that I need to offer a larger variety of avenues for learning, and I need to do a better job of preparing students for peer learning. My insights also suggests to me that my understanding of peer learning may need to be complicated so that it better applies to the ways adult learners can vary in their positions of authority with respect to one another.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper considered the obstacles faculty face when developing as online teachers, the ways adult learning theories can be of use in helping faculty and faculty developers overcome these challenges, and offered an autoethnography of the learning experienced by one writing professor in an online, asynchronous, six-week faculty development course. In analyzing this autoethnographic data, this study traced several themes such as the research subject's desire to stay in control of her learning, tensions surrounding her desire to combat isolation by interacting with others, and her eventual willingness to be self-directed in overcoming frustration. These resulting themes suggest several research implications for faculty development and future autoethnographic research.

A. Implications for Faculty Development

As the literature review of this paper has argued, to overcome obstacles to their professional development as online teachers, faculty need positive professional development experiences [7, 13] that respect their unique needs as motivated adult learners [5, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28]. The results of this autoethnography suggest a similar conclusion but with some refinements.

1. Implications about What Motivates Faculty to Pursue Development Opportunities

First, the results of this study suggest some refinements to theories about what motivates faculty and adult learners. Scholarship about faculty development suggests that faculty can be motivated by their desire to be innovative and meet the needs of students [11, 12, 13]. Certainly, my own reasons for pursuing online teaching fit well with this point. I initially became interested in online teaching because it was the only way for me to stay at my current institution and have the opportunity to work with graduate students and practicing teachers. Such an opportunity has in fact allowed me to innovate and meet the needs of these students. Also, the fact that online teaching offered me the chance to expand my social role as a professor from an undergraduate professor to professor who teaches both undergraduate and graduate students supports the assumption from the theory of andragogy that adults are motivated to learn when that learning relates to their social roles [5].

However, while I was motivated to pursue online teaching for the reasons related to the scholarship on both faculty development and andragogy, those motives were not strong enough by themselves to encourage me to take an online class. Like the faculty studied by O'Quinn and Corry and Schifter, I needed a professional development experience that fit my constraints with respect to time and money [9, 11]. I was motivated to take the online course I took because it was sensitive to both of these constraints. As an asynchronous offering in the summer, I was able to take the course while not under contract to teach and without completely disrupting summer travel plans with my family and professional plans for research. Having the chance to take the course for free as an auditor also pushed me to find a way to fit the course into my life.

My experience suggests that it is important for faculty developers to find out what is truly keeping faculty from seeking this development, and developers should take the initiative to remove as many of those material obstacles as possible. In my instance, the teacher of the course took it upon herself to arrange for

the auditing of the course, and I was able to enroll in the course and purchase the text online with minimal effort. The fact that someone else took the initiative to make the process of enrolling in an online faculty development course free and easy had a significant and positive impact on my own motivation to seek this training.

2. Implications about Adult Learning Preferences and Transformative Learning

Another important point suggested by the scholarship discussed in this paper is that when faculty move to teaching online, they are really being asked to make a paradigm shift in their teaching [3]. Making that paradigm shift requires faculty to consider their worldview very critically and be open to changing that world view which are both aspects of transformative learning [24, 34, 35, 36]. The autoethnography offered here does demonstrate some of my own transformative learning, but it also describes how some of my adult learning tendencies interfered with some of this transformation.

For instance, my desire to control my learning sometimes made me less open to the discussion format of the course. At times I note my desire for demonstrations and my concern that discussions take too much time to complete. Also, my desire to see the immediate application of learning caused me to at first ignore much of the discussion about whether or not to provide the whole class calendar in advance for an online class. These findings suggest to me the need for more study about the ways adult learning characteristics can interfere with learning. These findings also suggest that faculty developers should be sensitive to these adult learning characteristics in faculty. Developers may want to be prepared to challenge some of that desire for control and relevancy by using critical inquiry and discussion which are both transformative learning strategies [24, 32, 33] from which adult learners can benefit.

3. Implications about Self-Directed Learning and Faculty Development

In addition to making points about faculty motivation and paradigm shifting, the scholarship on adult learning noted that adults can often be self-directed learners [5] who are independent, like to take the initiative, are persistent, disciplined, confident, want to learn, and use goal-directed behaviors to organize their time in reaching their goal [24]. The autoethnography offered here also offers evidence of self-directed behavior in response to frustrations. For instance, when I had concerns that others were not reading my posts, I took it upon myself to make my posts shorter and more readable by adding lists and better subject headings. When something in the course did not work, I posted a note to the question and answer discussion forum that was always open. The professor was generally prompt in responding to me. That fact further encouraged me to persist in self-direction when some aspect of the course was falling short of my personal learning goals.

These findings suggest several implications for faculty developers. First, developers should plan for learning frustrations by setting up in advance avenues for handling those frustrations. In my case, simply having access to a question and answer forum that was always open and frequently read by the class and the professor made me feel comfortable in seeking help when I was frustrated. Second, faculty developers need to be ready to respond to those concerns with timeliness and efficiency so that learning is not unduly disrupted. Finally, self-directed behavior should be encouraged when observed. In the course I took, the professor often thanked class members for bringing technical or other problems to her attention. She not only addressed problems in a timely fashion, but she encouraged all the learners to be active in making the course the best it could be by encouraging the self-directed tendencies many of us brought to the class.

4. Implications about Peer Learning and Faculty Development

Finally, it is important to consider a recurring point in the literature on experiential, self-directed and transformative learning and that is that the one of the strategies for fostering each of these kinds of learning is the use of interaction, especially peer interaction [1, 2, 3, 24, 32, 33]. Peer interaction was certainly an important part of the course that I took. Much of the autoethnography considers my concerns about interacting with my peers and describes the learning that was driven by my peers. These experiences suggest to me that faculty developers who plan to use adult learning strategies need to be sensitive to the strengths and limitations of peer interaction.

Using peer interaction in faculty development courses has two important strengths. First, as the scholarship discussed in this paper notes, peer interaction can be invaluable in helping both faculty and adult learners counter the isolation [19, 20, 21] they may feel in an online format. Moreover, the autoethnographic data offered suggest that such interaction can be important to learners who need support to continue in the class while facing minor tragedies such as the storm described in this study.

Second, peer learning is an excellent way to invite adult learners to share their wealth of experiences with others. Inviting peers to share what they know, allows learners to learn from everyone in the course while at the same time receiving validation for their own experiences. As such, peer interaction can be an important strategy for engaging learners in experiential and transformative learning [24, 32, 33]. As the data in the autoethnographic suggest, my interactions with others eventually lead to transformative learning.

However, the data in this autoethnography also suggests that peer interaction can be occasionally problematic. It can be hard for peers to trust others if those others have more authority than they do which is often the case when faculty work together in academia. Faculty developers should also consider the range of experiences that faculty bring to the class. When interacting with peers, experienced faculty may sometimes feel as though they give more than they receive. Given these limitations with respect to peer learning, faculty developers should be careful to use a range of strategies in addition to peer learning that allow learners to meet their goals. Some good strategies to consider include self-assessments and self-reflections which invite learners to work independently but to also think critically about their learning.

B. Implications for Future Autoethnographic Research

In addition to suggesting implications about faculty development and adult learning theories, the method of autoethnographic research itself has implications for faculty development. Those who write about autoethnographic research argue that such research has the potential to transform both the researcher and the reader because such research invites both to participate in critical inquiry [37, 38, 39, 40]. The researcher must consider how his or her experiences relate to others while readers are invited to compare their experiences to that of the researcher [39]. This kind of thinking is akin to the transformative learning that faculty can benefit from as they make the aforementioned paradigm shift to teaching online. Faculty developers may want to capitalize on this connection by involving developing faculty in writing and sharing their own autoethnographies.

Not only does autoethnography connect well with the concepts related to transformative learning, but it can also be connected to experiential learning. As researchers note, autoethnography invites the researcher to use memory as well as direct observation in conducting his or her study [38, 39]. Since adult learners and faculty all have a wealth of experience, inviting them to do autoethnographic work that engages their memories would allow them to learn from their past [3, 25, 29, 30, 31] while receiving validation for their own experiences. Also, if adult learners and faculty share this work with others, the class can benefit by learning from each other's experiences.

Moreover, autoethnographic research can support self-directed learning. Since autoethnographic methods invite self-reflection [37, 38, 39], learners have the opportunity to direct their studies in ways that fit their own learning goals. As such, autoethnographic research can be a good way to help learners feel that they are in control of their learning and that such learning is relevant to them.

Drawing on autoethnographic methods in faculty development courses may even help experienced faculty develop important insights about what it means to be a student in an online course. In my case, I gained a better understanding of myself as a learner and a better understanding of the kinds of obstacles that the adult learners I work with can face when in the online classroom. In other words, bringing autoethnographic methods to faculty development courses may help make the course a significant and satisfying experience for the faculty member.

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