



Teacher Experiences in Converting Classes to Distance Learning in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The authors conducted a worldwide survey to explore the experiences of higher education faculty who converted classes to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most respondents experienced much higher workloads and stress than in face-to-face classes. Previous experience with Online Distance Learning (ODL) predicted positive faculty response. Less than half used a school-provided LMS, instead using a wide range of other technologies. Respondents said they learned the need for adaptability and good planning, emphasizing doing what it takes to serve their students. There was high variability in most answers, indicating that the experiences of individual teachers ranged widely between positive and negative. The researchers provide recommendations based on the findings, including the need for better ODL instructional design training as part of long-term professional development for faculty and remembering the importance of all student higher education experiences, many of which are beyond the scope of the actual classes.

KEYWORDS

Corona, Coronavirus, COVID, Distance Learning, Educational Technology, Learning, Teaching, Technology, Virus

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 2020, schools around the world suspended face-to-face instruction due to the coronavirus pandemic. Teachers around the world had no choice but to convert face-to-face classes to distance learning, often with short notice, a seemingly daunting task for teachers who had designed their courses for in-person instruction (Petzold, 2020). The transition presented challenges for academic staff, many of whom needed higher levels of technology competency and proficiency than they had

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previously acquired, as well as for students who suffered from feelings of isolation through not being able to interact with their classmates or attend in-person classes (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

Most of the early publications about the impacts of the pandemic on education either promoted the benefits of practices such as social distancing and event cancelation (Tate, 2020), challenges faced by students (Supiano, 2020, March 19), technology choices and resources (Darby, 2020, April 14), or the bigger-picture landscape of education and consequences of suspending face-to-face instruction (Ruf, 2020, March 17). Indeed, the only articles found in the scholarly press related to teaching and learning, because of the timeline required for empirical research, were editorials or reports on the course of the instructional transition in one school or geographic region, with limited quantitative data.

The actual experiences of teachers while converting their classes to distance instruction, and thereafter managing the classes, received little attention in the first weeks following the transition. The goal of this study, therefore, was to be among the first to document the experiences of teachers at higher education institutions as the result of converting their classes on short notice. The researchers did this by providing a statistical survey and open-ended questions about the extent to which courses were converted due to the pandemic and the perceived level of difficulty. More detailed exploration of the resulting pedagogy and technical problems were beyond the scope of this baseline study.

This study is, therefore, significant because it is one of the first scholarly publications to seek a world-wide sample of respondents exploring the experiences of higher education faculty as they negotiated the complex and stressful transition from face-to-face instruction to distance learning in existing classes. Furthermore, it considers the levels and categories of support provided by the schools and the future curriculum consequences of the pandemic.

The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1:** What were the experiences of higher education faculty in converting classes to distance learning?
- RQ2:** What instructional technology did higher education faculty use in the classes they converted to distance learning?
- RQ3:** What were the experiences of students, as perceived by higher education faculty, in classes converted to distance learning?
- RQ4:** To what extent did schools provide support for the transition of classes to distance learning?
- RQ5:** To what extent do the higher education faculty think the changes will become part of the curriculum in the long term?
- RQ6:** How difficult was teaching the classes after they were converted to distance learning?
- RQ7:** What did the higher education faculty members feel they learned from their experiences of converting classes to distance learning?

The researchers grouped these research questions into constructs of two or more questions each, Teacher Experiences, Instructional Technology, Student Experiences, Curriculum Integration, and Difficulty. These constructs, drawn from the research questions, represented the most salient issues related to the conversion of face-to-face classes to distance learning, and then teaching the classes for the remainder of the semester.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Little empirical research had yet reached the scholarly literature, as of the completion of this study, about the experiences of higher education faculty as they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The scholarly medical literature abounds with studies about the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus but little literature has yet reached publication that addresses the worldwide consequences for education and educational technology.

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