

Chapter 4

Education Faculty Lived Experiences of Student Interaction and Engagement in Online Courses: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the two authors co-construct meaning of their individual lived experiences as education faculty engaging in online teaching and learning. It highlights each faculty unique experiences facilitating graduate student learning in an online environment. Co-construction of meaning centers on pedagogical approaches, program design and focus, reflection of faculty-self experiences, employment of digital learning tools, and utilization of best practices of each faculty experience with teaching and learning in an online environment. This narrative is co-constructed following a collaborative autoethnographic approach by two faculty, whereby the central descriptions of each faculty member is situated in one's lived experiences and rich story of facilitating and instructing courses in an online learning environment. The faculty experiences are mainly derived from teaching graduate courses offered by a department of education. The research method in presenting two self-reflective narratives in online teaching and learning extends to doing "collaborative autoethnography."

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INTRODUCTION

The explosive growth and the rapid diffusion of the Internet, created new approaches to teaching and learning specifically in higher education (Crosta, 2004; Hewitt, 1998, Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, & Ritzhaupt, 2019). The interest in the development and use of distance learning in higher education has been steadily increasing and the past four decades, as reported by Allen and Seaman (2017) approximately 6 million of students attended at least one online learning course in 2015. The past twenty years the number of higher education institutions around the globe offering distance learning degrees have been significantly increased. A decade before, and specifically in 2002, 1.6 million students participated in at least one online course. Considering, how the current situation in education has been affected due to the pandemic, it seems that these numbers are expected to grow even more. About 1.5 billion learners in all educational levels were influenced by institutions decisions to lockdown in 191 countries due to the COVID-2019 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). The world keeps battling with the ongoing pandemic and the Universities are struggling to decide which mode of delivery to apply for next semester(s): distance learning, blended learning or in campus conventional delivery.

The aforementioned expansion created the need for faculty members to teach online practices (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004). Online courses require different teaching and learning models, and design principles to be implemented. Many faculty members moved from conventional teaching to online teaching (Wiesenberger & Stacey, 2008) without being appropriately and adequately prepared. There are cases where the same materials and approaches employed in conventional courses are transferred to online courses and the elements of online presence, interactivity, collaboration, and engagement are poorly acknowledged, ill represented and not given the appropriate focus and attention. Having in mind the *social-constructivist approach* (Vygotsky, 1978) students can learn through peer interactions and collaboration more effectively than they are able to do through individual learning. How do faculty members design online courses in order to get the students interact with each other and become engaged with the content and their peers? What do faculty members need to be able to have engaged students where they actively interact with their peers and course material? In order to find the answer to the aforementioned question we need to first to investigate instructor's experiences in online environments which are considered to be under represented in relation to studies about students' experiences. Additionally, based on research conducted by Valverde-Berrocoso, Garrido-Arroyo, Burgos-Videla, & Morales-Cevallos (2020) where it presents a systematic literature review about e-learning revealed three main themes: 1) e-learning and online students; 2) e-learning and online-teachers; and 3) e-learning and curriculum. In regards to 1) e-learning and online students, the focus is on self-regulation and dropout and retention. The research in e-learning and online teachers focuses on two main dimensions: professional development (in-service teachers) and teacher education (pre-service teachers). Finally, the third theme, e-learning and curriculum, seems to be more focused on impact and success. Other identified subtopics are «Course & Learning management» and «Instructional Design». The instructor's role in an online course is often presented as a silent parameter rather than crucial in the learning experience (Arbaugh, 2002; Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; May & Short, 2003). The current paper aims to emphasize on the importance of the online instructor role by exploring student interaction and engagement through faculty members' views and experiences.

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