

Chapter 5

The Experiences and Self-Efficacy of Faculty Members Using Distance Learning for the First Time: A Qualitative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to understand faculty members' experience, self-efficacy, and sense-making processes after teaching via online distance learning for the first time in the Spring, Summer, and Fall 2020 academic terms (i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic). The research also sought to understand how participants described their teaching and learning methods and approaches after having completed the three academic terms and received students' feedback. This study aimed to use the findings to develop and refine the preparation and procedural guidance offered to first-time distance learning teachers to improve their methods, approaches, and experiences. Using a phenomenological analysis, the researcher collected data from 70 interviews and seven focus groups. The results recommended school leadership to reform their current distance learning-based programs, and to first-time users of distance learning in teaching faculties to help them reflect on their teaching and learning methods and approaches based on a self-efficacy perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning through distance learning platforms has been a significant development during the past decade (Allen et al., 2016). A large number of colleges and universities in the United States have been developing and creating distance learning courses, certificates, and degree programs for both traditional and nontraditional students, including returning, evening, and adult learners (NTREAs) (Dos

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Santos, 2020d). In 2012, only 12.6% of American college and university students were taking at least one distance learning-based course. However, the student enrolment of distance learning-based courses has significantly increased over the decade, particularly due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Such an increase in enrolment arises from the changing demands and expectations of schools, instructors, students, and employers in terms of the development of instructional technology, convenience, work responsibilities, family commitments, tuition fees, geographic location, workplace requirements, academic and career interests, the achievement of education and career goals, career development, and financial considerations.

Based on a recent report (Duffin, 2020), over 35% of American colleges and universities offered at least one distance learning-based course during the 2018 academic year, before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The abovementioned percentage should be increased from Fall 2019 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the recommendation of social distancing. However, due to the fast change, only a few studies and project focused on the changes and experiences of distance learning education (i.e. before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic). Therefore, further research into the teaching and learning model of distance learning is essential in order to understand and reform current planning and management. In fact, as many students needs to study their courses via distance-learning, university lecturers also need to deliver their lessons online. As a result, there is a large demand for online faculty members in order to serve the increased student population. Over the years, some colleges and universities have created training courses and programs for online teaching. However, it is not hard to imagine that most faculty members have not taken these courses if they were not responsible for online teaching as well as their regular face-to-face courses. Although there is a wide literature on teaching and learning methods and approaches to students' achievement, only a few studies look at the self-efficacy of first-time distance learning teachers (i.e. faculty members, university lecturers, or instructors) at the college and university level.

A previous study (Bok, 2015) indicates that online faculty members are coming to dominate the number of teaching fellows in higher education. Unlike their compatriots in previous decades, NTREAs (Dos Santos, 2020d) may attend school to achieve academic qualifications during their free time. As these special groups of students cannot attend full-time classes during the day due to family and financial responsibilities, the flexibility offered by distance learning program is appropriate. The study (Bok, 2015) further shows that although some vocational programs, such as nursing qualifications, may attract some learners who can rearrange their daytime schedules for the compulsory courses, many prefer either fully online programs or blended courses (i.e. with both online and on-campus lessons) in order to balance the responsibilities of education and family (Hrastinski, 2019). As a result, there is a need to increase the population of faculty members who can deliver distance learning and online courses.

As students switch to distance learning platforms for their university education, faculty members should adopt appropriate teaching and learning methodologies and strategies to meet their needs (Dorn, 2017). Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the use of online and part-time faculty members provided flexibility and financial freedom to colleges and universities, as most of these teachers were on course-to-course contracts. Unlike in the traditional model of tenured and tenure-track positions, these adjunct teachers may be terminated by colleges and universities for any reason. Some scholars (Palloff & Pratt, 2011) have argued that the education sector has adapted a commercial model with business-based contracts and recruitment for faculty. In other words, they propose that faculty members teaching online courses may consider themselves as freelancers in terms of their course-to-course contracts (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). However, during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic, distance learning and online teaching can become an educational trend at the college and university level due to the demands of the student populations. As mentioned above, the traditional tenured and tenure-track lecturers may only need to deliver on-campus

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