

The Impact of Teacher's Online Learning Experiences on
Distance Learning Development and Facilitation

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As new technologies have emerged, the concept of distance learning has continued to gain interest on all levels of education due to flexible scheduling and lowered costs. An increased amount of schools and higher educational institutions have not only embraced this concept, but have turned to distance learning as a way to increase enrollment and provide a student-centered experience. Not only is distance learning a viable option for students, but teachers also have found new and innovative ways to conduct their class room activities while increasing student engagement through various emerging technologies.

As the benefits of distance learning stretch far beyond those stated, many argue that distance learning often offers a lack of social interaction, feelings of frustration, issues of volition, and it is associated with higher rates of student dissatisfaction, withdrawal, and attrition. (Capdeferro & Romero, 2012; Deimann & Bastiaens, 2010; Power & Gould-Morven, 2011). As many students have become comfortable with the face-to-face instruction and the immediate feedback they receive within a traditional classroom, these individuals have struggled to adapt to the limited live interaction available in a distance course. Are these above mentioned limitations due to the nature of the distance learning approach, or do the teachers within these courses lack the experience to understand the challenges that these students often face?

Much research has been conducted into the causes of student frustration, lack of motivation, and overall dissatisfaction with their online experience. However, there is a lack of research into teacher experience as online students and the implications of the impact it may have on their ability to design and administer an effective online course. A vital component of teaching is one's ability to understand the perspective of the student. If a teacher fails to recognize the challenges a student faces in a classroom, how can they effectively provide

academic quality? This standard must also be considered when evaluating the success of a student in an online course or program.

The Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (1984) quotes, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p.38). As teachers no doubly have found their expertise in their subject matter to be the greatest asset to their teaching ability, this knowledge was not only gained from textbooks or lectures, but from the hands on experience the teacher encountered during their time as a student. After several years of teaching a subject, a teacher may lose sight of how complex a subject can be to the novice student. Benander (2009) states, “Reminding oneself of what it feels like to be a novice can provide important insight to help create the structured experiences required to help students move out of the novice state” (p.37). As this return to the learning state can be done through reflection upon past experience, how can a distance learning teacher reflect upon their experience in an online class, if they themselves have never encountered this form of instruction?

Significance of Study

This research may provide valuable feedback to both online educators and administrators of the importance of concrete based experiences and the impact it can have on a distance learning program. The expectations of this study is to support the need for experience based learning as suggested by Kolb (1984) , to enhance an online teacher’s portfolio, either by continuing education or professional development. It is the intention of the researcher to provide support that these teaching experiences will considerably increase student success and satisfaction with distance learning. The results of this research will influence teachers to partake in the various experiential learning opportunities they have to significantly increase their ability to design, facilitate, and reflect upon the association of online learning and teaching experiences.

Distance Learning

As there has been and still is a considerable amount of research being done in distance learning, it is important to identify key terms that are commonly used in distance learning research. For the purpose of this study, distance learning will be any instruction that incorporates all or part of the instruction to be conducted at a distance. This broad term includes hybrid, online, and correspondence delivery methods. This particular study into teacher's online experience will focus primarily on instruction through the Internet. All courses within this study will be 100% web-based, with no traditional instruction. Hybrid courses will not be included in the category of "online" instruction.

Rationale

The foundation of this study begins at the heart of education. A teacher is not only confident in their approach to teaching, but also has a firm understanding of the content. This confidence not only comes from years of schooling, but in most cases it comes through the "hands on" experience of working directly with the content. One would not enter a career in Mathematics Education if they were not confident and highly knowledgeable of the various aspects of math. Likewise, those who pursue a career in teaching typically explore various theoretical approaches to teaching within the classroom, but also find a required amount of time to experience the daily routine of a teacher through activities such as observations and student teaching opportunities. The concept behind this research is to follow this strategy in regards to online instruction, typically defined as distance learning.

Power and Gould-Morven (2011) advise that, "OL (Online Learning), despite its growing recognition, is often associated with high rates of student dissatisfaction and isolation, withdrawal, and attrition" (p.19). As much research has been dedicated to understanding what

contributes to these negative experiences, few studies have focused on a teacher's ability to facilitate an online course after the experience of being an online student. Considering the impact of the Experiential Learning Theory and the technologies that are used to structure online learning, this study may not only support the need for teacher's experience of learning online, but to provide future researchers with a foundation to explore various aspects of student dissatisfaction and its potential connection to inexperienced online teachers.

Following the theoretical foundation of the Experiential Learning Theory, it must be noted that there are different variations of this theory, and clarification must be made in order to understand the direction this research intends to take. As identified by Clark, Threeton, and Ewing (2010) learning through experience can be viewed as both the skills practiced in the classroom that eventually would be reenacted within a job (Smith ,2001) or the reflection of the various daily activities that occur, thus providing a "life-long-learning" experience (Houle, 1980). Becoming engaged in the online topic, as well as understanding the limitations of distance learning can be directly experienced through both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Frustration with the lack of immediate feedback, technology issues, and one's ability to stay focused and on task can all remind a teacher what students face on a daily bases while online.

On the other hand, reflection is a critical stage of self-improvement, and can be of great value when looking upon how your experience will better prepare you for future experiences. Without a doubt, confident builds as you repeat a process or teach a particular topic through the Internet. It is the opinion of the researcher to value both approaches to this theory, and consider both when conducting the study.

For the purpose of this study, "distance learning" will be considered any form of instruction where part of the training is conducted at a distance. The term "online" will refer to a

course or program completely held within a web-based environment, with no live classroom interaction or contact with fellow classmates or teachers. This study will concentrate on online teachers, and will not represent teachers who use the hybrid method of instruction.

Research Questions

As with all forms of instruction, constant improvements are being made to create more efficient and conducive learning environments to maximize student success. As professional development opportunities have begun to offer teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to meet the diverse needs of a distance learning student, there is truly no substitute for concrete experience and self-reflection into such an experience. The researcher seeks to ask the questions:

- Does online teacher experience as an online student positively impact their ability to design, facilitate or evaluate a distance learning course?
- Does professional development for online teachers provide the same confidence to instruct a distance learning course that online learning experience does?

Null Hypothesis

Online teacher's experience as an online student will have no effect on their ability to design, facilitate, or evaluate distance learning courses.

Ho: Online teachers with online learning experience = Online teachers with no online learning experience

Hypothesis

Online teacher's experience as an online student will positively affect their ability to design, facilitate, or evaluate distance learning courses.

H1: Online teachers with online learning experience > Online teachers with no online learning experience

Literature Review

It can be argued that one of the most challenging aspects of teaching is the ability to understand the perspective of a student and recall what it is like to be new to a subject or method. Benander (2009) suggests "For a faculty member who has been teaching for many years, taking a class as a novice learner can be a valuable form of reflection on the teaching and learning interaction" (p. 36). In her literature, Benander highlights many of the key points of David Kolbs's Experiential Learning Theory in regards to teacher's experience and reflection upon the learning experience. As Benander's focus is that of traditional classroom learning, the online method of instructional delivery also requires the need for "self-reflection on teaching and learning from the point of view of the teacher to that of the learner" (Benander, 2009, p. 36).

Clark, Threeton, and Ewing (2010) explore the Experiential Learning Theory through the perspective of Technical Education and Technical Teacher Education. In the literature, the authors recommend that "Additionally, career and technical education teacher educators may enhance their programs by providing instruction to pre-service teachers in authentic experiential learning pedagogy" (p. 46). The authors explore the different perspectives of the Experiential Learning Theory and how this applies to teacher preparation. As the literature does not specifically address online learning, the fundamentals of technical education remain the same, regardless of the method. As technology is used both by students in the classroom and while

online, the support of this literature can easily be replicated for distance courses and the content found in such careers.

Negative perceptions of distance learning can contribute to providing educators with the challenge of finding new and innovative ways of providing academic quality through online instruction. Before pointing the finger at the teacher, we must understand what research has been done in regards to student dissatisfaction within distance courses. Several issues that often fuel a negative perception of online learning include: delayed feedback, lack of immediacy, student isolation, and lack of learner community support (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011). Though teachers may not be directly at fault for these negative experiences, their ability to provide immediate feedback, utilize activities to avoid isolation, and support social interaction are more likely to be discovered through experience.

Power and Gould-Morven (2011) refer to distance learning as a paradox that is both “booming and busting” at the same time by increasing its availability to students and stumbling upon obstacles that possibly prevent the students from learning. With the conflict of distance learning and its opportunity to improve higher education, one must also consider the fact that distance learning is not always supported or recognized consistency across the field of education. The authors refer to this idea as the “head of gold, feet of clay paradox” (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011). The authors also discuss other considerations involving the various stakeholders involved in the distance learning program. Students, teachers and administrators all share responsibility in the program, yet each have different perceptions of how and why distance learning should be used and evaluated (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011). It is these different perspectives that pave the way for a better understanding by reflecting upon those who have experienced these conflicts, and those who were not aware of them.

Methodology

The purpose of these study is to determine if an online teacher's experience as an online student positively impacts their perception of their distance learning teaching abilities and confidence to design, facilitate, and evaluate online instruction. It is the intention of the researcher to use a mixed methods approach of obtaining data through both survey questionnaires and open-ended questions that will allow participants to elaborate on certain aspects of the study. In addition, formal interviews may be conducted to further investigate the results of the survey and provide an enhanced understanding of the teacher's ability.

Participants

Participants for this study will be limited to higher educational institutions. Teachers of a higher educational institution who have taught or are currently teaching an on-line course will be asked to complete an incentive-based survey. As this study is seeking to obtain data on online teachers, hybrid based courses will not be considered for this study. Teacher participants may be full-time or part-time faculty, and will be asked to disclose their status as lecturer, tenured, or non-tenured faculty member of the institution. For the purpose of the study, teacher participant names will not be disclosed in the final research defense and written presentation.

Instrumentation

The data collection process will be conducted as an online survey questionnaire created by the researcher and placed on the web. Teacher participants will be asked to only participate if they have or are currently teaching an online course. Initial data will obtain information about the teacher's instructional experience, including but not limited to: how many years of experience in traditional, hybrid, and online instruction, highest level of education, subject

matter, and teaching status (full-time vs part-time). Furthermore, questions will seek to gain an understanding of the teacher's experience with course design, development, and evaluation.

The next section of the teacher survey will obtain information about the teacher's education in regards to their personal online learning experiences. Questions in regards to the number of courses taken, subject(s), level of education (ex. Bachelor's, Master's) and institutions at which they completed online coursework. Several open-ended questions will be offered asking teachers about their online experience. Specifically, teachers will have an opportunity to elaborate on the positive and negative aspects of their online learning, as well as how this experience impacted their current online teaching abilities and confidence to design and evaluate online instruction.

A third section of the teacher survey will gain information about any professional development or training for online instruction that the teacher may have had received during their employment as a teacher. At the conclusion of the survey, participants will be identified within four groups as follows:

- No Online Learning Experience with No Professional Online Development
- No Online Learning Experience with Professional Online Development
- Online Learning Experience with No Professional Online Development
- Online Learning Experience with Professional Online Development

Procedure

An invitation to participate in the study and complete the survey will be sent via e-mail to the online teachers at the chosen institutions. Study candidates will be asked to complete the

survey within 10 days. After the first 10 days, a second reminder will be sent allowing for an additional 5 days to complete the survey. Once the survey has concluded, the researcher will organize the data and separate the teachers into the four groups.

Limitations

Limitations for this research may include inadequate samples of teachers who have had experience as an online student. As online learning has only begun to impact education within the past 15 years, many tenured faculty who have obtained their education prior to the popularity of online learning may have not experienced the opportunity to take an online course. For this reason, the teacher survey will seek to obtain information about the teacher's years of service and consider this when providing the results of the study.

Timeline

The following section outlines the researchers intended timeline to complete the research project.

Activity	Expected Completion Date:
Complete Doctoral Coursework	July 2015
Doctoral Candidate Committee	August 2015
Comprehensive Exams	September 2015
ID Dissertation Chair	October 2015
Form Dissertation Committee	November 2015
Dissertation Proposal	December 2015
Oral Defense	January 2016
IRB Approval	March 2016
Data Collection	Spring Semester 2016
Data Analyzed	Fall Semester 2016
Committee Review	January 2017
Dissertation Defense	March 2017
Revisions Completed	May 2017

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