

A Road Less Travelled, a Road Nonetheless*

Breda Mc Taggart, Aine Doherty, Cillian O`Murchu

Institute of Technology, Sligo

Abstract

Globalisation of learning and digitalisation of learning are part of new learning environments. Such evolutions are significant as they alter the way education is delivered and supported (Fahey, 2014). For many educators, this move to digitalisation of learning is a natural progression, a decision, a choice. While for others it is a requirement incorporated as part of changing pedagogy and plans within an organisation inducing some educators to feel that it is imposed upon them.

Using a self-study methodology, supported by naturalistic diaries and analysed through the process of content data analysis, this research study explores the journey with four academics who have moved from a traditional class-based lecturing methodology to one where online live teaching is a requirement for the programmes they deliver.

While findings acknowledge the potential that this newer delivery model provides academic and their students, they also articulate the concerns that such a change brought with it for educators. These concerns extended not only to their practices and their pedagogy, but most surprisingly to their professional identity in its totality, forcing the educator to explore and ask questions about their roles as professional educators within a higher education space.

Keywords: Online learning, effective pedagogy, professional identity.

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1. Introduction

The learning experiences and journey of students undertaking programmes in higher education institutes have been examined from many and varied perspectives.

A key stakeholder in this journey is the educator, known to have a positive impact, or not, on student engagement, learning and for some student completion (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 1998; McTaggart and Cavaliero, 2015). However, less is known about their experiences as educators, and their journey delivering higher education programmes of learning within higher education spaces.

This study wishes to address this issue by examining the experiences of educators in a case institute during their transition to a synchronous (real-time) online model of programme delivery. Specifically, this study explores changes to educator's practice, pedagogy and professional identity during their transition to a synchronous online model of delivery.

Staff within the case institute have been using online teaching platforms (such as Moodle) to support face- to -face delivery for an extended period, however, this research specifically examines the experiences of those who are transiting to live online teaching for the first time. In doing so, the paper provides an understanding of this journey from the educators self-perspective.

1.1 Case Context

The case institute has engaged in the use of online learning platforms for over fifteen years. Consequently, supports to assist staff transitioning to the online space are available including a designated online learning team who assist with the educational technology requirements and an Information Technology (IT) services team who are available in and out of hours for any technical issues. Peer-to-peer support is normal practice in the institute and is invaluable in supporting successful transitioning to new models of pedagogy and practice.

2. A Changing/Changed Landscape

National education policy within Ireland concludes that in the years ahead students will choose to learn in a variety of ways; full-time or part-time, on campus or off campus, classroom-based, blended, online or accelerated learning (Department of Education and

Skills, 2011; p. 54). This has already commenced, where higher education providers are delivering programmes of learning to students all over the world, resulting in a proliferation of online and blended (online and face-to-face) learning opportunities and the acknowledgement, if not acceptance, that it is here to stay (Bonk, 2009).

Teaching institutions, similar to the case institute, who have embraced this delivery method, have noted significant benefits. These include an increase in student numbers and revenue, in tandem with a reduction in unit costs (Evan and Haase, 2001; Bartley and Golek, 2004; Allen and Seaman, 2014; Nguyen, 2015).

This delivery mechanism, whilst cost-efficient and effective, is also believed to support accessible, convenient and flexible educational opportunities for both the traditional and non-traditional learner (Chau, 2010; Aslanian and Clinefelter, 2013). This has resulted in a sustained request for online learning provision from the higher education sector and its student (Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh, 2004). All of which is summed up by Baer, (1998):

As higher education faces formidable challenges caused by changing student demographics, severe financial constraints, and lingering institutional inflexibilities, institutions of higher education are turning to new communications and information technologies that promise to increase access, improve the quality of instruction, and (perhaps) control costs and the Internet with using online education and web-based instruction has been able to offer this to colleges and universities (Baer, 1998, p. 1).

For the educator within teaching institutes, the move to an online environment has been a more varied journey, where the change has been met with both enthusiasm and scepticism in varying measures. For some, significant benefits have been noted, including personal satisfaction at their success in transitioning to a new learning space and the development of skills that are invaluable to modern day learning, alongside the belief that this model supports better student engagement (Oakley, 2004; O'Donnell and Sharp, 2012). For others, there are concerns regarding the additional workload that this delivery method may entail, the technical challenges, and (in contradiction to its supporters) a fear of a reduction in student engagement with their studies, due to limited, or no, face- to- face interaction, (Gellman-Danley and Fetzner, 1998; Dymont, Downing, Budd, 2013).

Less discussed, but noteworthy as causing educator concern, is the impact of digitalisation of learning on the professionalism and professional identity of the educator (Adams, 2012). The impact of which may challenge the educator to ask difficult questions of themselves regarding who they are and how they carry out their role, ultimately impacting on their symbolic capital and order (Bourdieu, 1989, p.17). This educational capital and order allow academics to

recognise themselves, their values and beliefs, within a given context. e.g. the lecturer holding the authority, with subject expertise, within a typical classroom environment, (front and centre) and the audience focused on this authority, leads to an understanding of what it is to for them to be an academic (Žižek, 1989, pp. 43-44; Clegg, 2008; Whitechurch and Gordon, 2010). The introduction of any new change, even a change in the delivery models, has the potential to challenge this capital and order. Dymont, et al. (2013, p.143) are in agreement, concluding that “It could be argued that teacher educators also have intentions, expectations and assumptions about their university jobs and that these have been brought into question by the move to online delivery”.

Due to opposing views on the value of online models of learning, it is unclear from the educator’s perspective what actually occurs, and why it may occur, when transitioning within this space? Does it impact on order? Does it impact on educator’s power, confidence and delivery? Is it such a big transition in today’s technological world? To answer these questions, we need those who are part of this transition to tell their own lived truth, their own story of learning.

3. Research Design

As this project wished to explore the transitionary experiences with and within the educator as part of their online delivery teaching journey, it was necessary to find a methodology and method to support the collection of this data type. This led the researchers to the *teacher as researcher* method. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) define teacher research as “systematic intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom work” (pp. 23-24). Which on this occasion would require the participants, as researchers, to reflect on their own practice, pedagogy and identity, before, during and after the move to online programme delivery.

There are several approaches that can be used to investigate the living experiences of teachers, including the method known as “self-study” (Hubball and Clarke, 2010). This is a research methodology with its foundation in social constructivism, whereby researchers use methods which provide the needed evidence and context for understanding their practice (Hamilton and Pinnegar, 1998, p.240). The belief is that educator understanding and knowledge develops through a greater understanding of personal experience. It allows participants (who are also the researchers) to focus on the nature and development of their professional and personal knowledge through examining, in real-time, their own learning

beliefs, practices, processes, contexts, and relationships (Berry, 2007). The researcher participant uses their experiences and problematises themselves within their professional practice with the goal of reframing their beliefs and/or practice (Feldman, 2002).

Although this approach offers much, there are concerns regarding its validity, where, similar to any other research approaches, this method must be systematic in order to be considered acceptable within the research community and research field (LaBoskey, 2004). This systematic process begins with a decision on the features of this methodology, including that this process would bring to the forefront the importance of self; it would make us a resource to research; it would urge us to be critical of ourselves and our roles both as researchers and educators (Fieldman, Paugh and Mills, 2004, p.959). Within this frame, different data collection methods were explored.

3.1 Data Collection Methods

While many data collection methods are possible within a self-study methodology, on this occasion the use of participant diaries would allow collection of the data needed to explore experiences of transitioning to a live online teaching space. This method involves repeated written self-reports that aim to capture events, feelings and emotions (Tang, 2002), allowing and facilitating in-depth descriptions of how people think about their world and their living experiences. As this was a new method of data collection for the participant researchers, it was decided that a variable schedule combination-(variable plus fixed schedule designs) (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003) for diary entry would be utilised. Within this, diary participants were provided with three prompt areas for consideration, 1) to provide an overview of activity, events, or general information, 2) to record their personal observations and reflections on online learning delivery and 3) to note anything that the participant-researcher believed might support an effective transition to this space (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli, 2003). Entries were intended to be participant led, i.e. entries were narrated when participants felt it was appropriate to complete an entry. This resulted in most entries occurring pre or post-delivery of live lectures. It was up to each participant how many entries occurred. Consequently, entries aligned in the most part with the numbers of live lectures that participants were undertaking and as such six or more detailed entries were recorded.

The diary template was available electronically or in hard copy and participants had a choice on which method to use to complete it. Consequently, some participants completed it entirely electronically others used a combination, where some entries were handwritten. These were later transcribed verbatim to support data analysis. Data was gathered over one academic

semester.

3.2 Study Participants

Participants self-nominated to be part of this study from different subject areas within one faculty, with a commonality of not having engaged in previous online live delivery. This is in contradiction to other faculties within the case institute where synchronous online delivery has developed and evolved as a successful method of delivery within recent years. Of the four academic participants, three were female and one male. Three had not actively selected to use this delivery method but were interested in its potential. One member had expressed a preference to undertake this new method.

Programmes that participants were delivering online were both at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using the constant comparative method. This method “combines systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling in order to generate theory that is integrated, close to the data, and expressed in a form clear enough for further testing” (Conrad, Neumann, Haworth and Scott, 1993, p. 280). This process involved four stages: “(1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 105). Within this context, data analysis involved reading diary entries, identifying and coding the data, identifying relationships between these data sets, and searching for common sequences and themes amongst them (Alaszewski, 2006). This inductive approach resulted in three thematic headings.

- Concerns- Tangible and Intangible
- The Art of Teaching
- Professional Identity

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Data gathered through a self-methodology allowed for a deep level of self-reflection, above the superficial, on what changes occurred whilst transiting to a new model of teaching, moving to fundamental questions on what it is to be a lecturer in today’s world.

Following an analysis of the data three distinct themes emerged; *Concerns- Tangible and Intangible*; *The Art of Teaching*; *Professional Identity*. These themes, whilst interrelated, were equally significant by themselves in explaining and understanding the journey of participants.

Results provided by participants, whilst presenting experiences, did not give specifics on what changes to practice, pedagogy and professional identity occurred for each of them when moving to online live teaching, but instead provided a rich discourse on their journey of change within a modern higher education space.

Each theme/finding will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

4.1 Concerns- Tangible and Intangible

Unsurprisingly, with the transition to an alternative model of delivery, all participants spoke in great detail about their feelings of worry and anxiety. These were not attributed to a single cause, the using the technology (Practice) itself, worries about student engagement and how to maintain it using this new platform (Pedagogy). Intangible concerns included losing control and perceived power in the teaching space (Power), and concerns about their ability to transcend successfully, to be an effective lecturer in an alternative teaching space (Professionalism). This level of personal reflection led or indeed forced participants to explore the root cause of their concerns. This is further examined below.

4.1.1 Practice-based Concerns

Diaries began with participants taking a very practical and pragmatic approach to live online lecturing, concerning themselves with the technology and how to use it. Chloe explains it from her perspective:

.....I do not have a clue how to work it (the technology). A bit in denial if I am honest. This is causing me some worry and apprehension as I know the content but I just do not know how to deliver it and how such a subject area can be delivered online.

Peter outlines his experience, stating

I began my first online class by getting setup relatively early. There were a number of bits to setup on the software packages that I used to deliver and record the lectures, ensuring the microphone was on etc...before the class could begin. I was a small bit tentative as I didn't want anything to go wrong at this early stage.

Consequently, it appeared that initial concerns, which were voiced by all participants, were purely concerned with 'getting online' and ensuring that all the technology was working:

“IT support are going to come up to make sure I press all the buttons, sounds quite silly, but I think if I can get started with that successfully then hopefully I progress and manage anything else.”

Other comments included; “What if it breaks down?”

Once participants began to use the technology in a real-life context, this practising based concern abated, with an acknowledgement that, as with any new skill set, repeated use supported personal proficiency with the tool.

Participants also alluded to how this basic skill set was aligned with their confidence in role as an educator. Valerie explains:

Initially, I worried about technology, but after attending three online teaching workshops in June and September I am now confident in my ability to navigate the software.

My worry moved on to preparation then, having enough time to prepare documents in advance for students.

I was also worried about knowing my audience, in a regular classroom it is easier to get to grips with who your students are and their backgrounds – this allows you to tailor your lectures better....

There is reassurance for all of us that this type of practice-based concern is not unique to this context, but has been found in other studies where participants stated that using an online platform for the first time is like “navigating in the dark” (Bender,2003, p.45).

Study participants also advised against complacency with the use of the technology within this learning environment, where the fear of something going wrong and the impact on student learning experience was believed to be more significant than in other learning environments. For this, and other reasons, it became evident that educators invested in preparing and exploring how best to deliver within the online space. This will be elaborated on later in the paper.

4.1. 2 Pedagogy based Concern

Once participants had become relatively competent in using technology, their anxiety moved to concerns about how to teach effectively in this online space.

They acknowledged that now practice was under control, a deeper level of reflection could occur and facilitate an exploration of their pedagogy within an online space. This was evident where each of the participants spent significant amounts of time reflecting on what had occurred in their lectures and making a plan to improve things for their subsequent synchronous delivery. This resulted in all participants acknowledging that learning to teach in online environments requires the educator to develop new teaching and learning strategies in order to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by it. For example, Valerie concluded that:

My next lecture is in two weeks, I have a lot to prepare in that timeframe and I may consider using polls/quizzes in the next class. One step at a time!

All participants conclusions concurred, similar to other studies, that teaching online is a new and different experience than teaching in a classroom (LaMonica, 2001).

4.1.3 Power based Concern

Lecturers were a little disconcerted regarding students having power in this learning space. The level of concern caused by lack of familiarity within this space led to some educators feeling that they lost power, particularly as the students did not appear to struggle with this alternative type of delivery. Chloe reported:

I do feel that because the students are more used to the technology it also has shifted some power to them, no bad thing I am sure, but normally I am in control of what happens in the classroom, not so with this at the moment as the platform is unfamiliar, this makes it almost a shared learning experience.... I would prefer not to be a position where they are giving me reassurance that all is well about the technology, I require and encourage their feedback about the content, if they know it or not, not as used of needing guidance on the process. This I had not thought of before but clearly should be getting student feedback on delivery and how that works to ensure that every effort is made to support learning. Power and control spring to mind.

The loss of power was related to perceived loss of professional authority.

4.1.4 Professional and Professionalism Based Concern

The effect of the concerns identified above led the participants to reassess their own understanding of lecturing, their role as an educator and who they were in this space. This led participants to feel less confident and less professional than they would have previously

experienced or aspired to. This provoked questions within themselves regarding their ability to do their job and led to professional and professional-based concerns. The interrelated nature of concerns is explained by Peter.

At the end of the class, as always, I doubled checked the recordings to ensure all was ok. It was only until the following morning that one of the students emailed me with an issue with the recording. The sound had stopped working for some reason after ten minutes in each of the recordings I had made. This was terribly frustrating... I had to record the lecture in two parts again on my own! This knocked my confidence back a small bit as I was unsure as to the cause of my problem – most likely a loose connection with my headset.

It ultimately led participants to acknowledge to themselves that they were not completely satisfied with their pedagogy and professionalism in its totality, however, feelings of loss of control would reduce once their confidence in the new method of delivery had improved.

4.2 The Art of Teaching

A shift to a different learning and teaching model led to a more forensic review by the educator of themselves as educators and in doing so brought participants to explore their pedagogy in its totality. While pedagogy is the art and science of teaching (Marzano, 2007), participants on this occasion would stress that it is not a still life drawing, it is an art that can and should evolve to meet learner and learning needs. Participants also clearly identified that this art needs some work. Peter explains:

WK 5). I had researched and spoken to a number of people that delivered maths modules online and they all swore by the visualizer. This was a piece of technology that allowed you to record pen and paper into your live lecture whilst recording at the same time. This sounded ideal for me. Again this was a new piece of technology, so I was unsure how well it would work for me (or more how well I could work it!)

..... It was quite straightforward to use once it was set up correctly and I felt a lot more confident in my online delivery. It worked smoothly throughout the lecture and the students that attended found it useful.

Valerie appeared to be of a similar opinion, where she concluded;

I would like to see what other opportunities there are for improving my online delivery style and techniques.... I don't like doing things by half, so if I'm going to continue learning online then I want my lectures to be the best they can be. I want to learn too!

It would appear that participants agree with Palloff and Pratt's (1999) statement where they conclude that: "The shift to online learning poses enormous challenges to instructors and their institutions". But participants did not support their further statement, where they concluded that:

Many faculty and administrators believe that the cyberspace classroom is no different from the face-to-face classroom and that approaches used face-to-face will surely work online. Many further believe that all that is needed to successfully teach online is to "convert" the course material (p.349).

Self-study participants did not expect that the change would be easy and were aware that it was not purely about conversion but were unsure of what and how to improve their pedagogy within this framework. Consequently, participants were thinking of ways to improve this by talking to peers, trying to implement ideas that they had gathered during training and then trialling them within the learning environment. There did not appear to be one specific way to improve this pedagogy, but an acknowledgement that new ways to be/become more effective in their teaching needed to be explored and worked upon. Participants of this study came to a similar conclusion to Gerald and Gerald (2002),

That as the teacher is no longer at the front of the class, and the links that have traditionally existed between teacher and student are broken. This means that (they) teachers have to think more about how students learn, how they will receive information; they have to become more concerned with the process of learning and with facilitating learning (p.383).

4.3 (Becoming) A Professional Educator

Leading on from a discussion on pedagogy brought the participants to discuss their roles as professionals and professional educators. All members of the lecturing team to Higher Education institutes are recruited based on their professional and external expertise e.g. drama, mathematics, digital marketing, health, research capability, rather than on their teaching ability. Consequently, participants were not employed for their lecturing expertise, but their subject authority was considered the requirement for their role (Jarvis, 2006). These previous roles had their own cultural capital and symbolic identification (Zizek, 1989). Diary entries led the participants to examine this role in the context of a shifting professional identity as part of their transcending to an online space. When reflecting on this transition, it required participants to explore who they were, take honest appraisal and re-imagine their professional self. Asking questions of themselves: Who was I? Who am I? Who do I want to be? Whilst this was more prevalent and articulated in one case, it was alluded to by all. Specifically, Katie

narrated:

(Week 3) If I am to reflect on that I suspect it is that I was confident in the role of a..... and not in the role of a lecturer, this is something similar, it is a shifting and introduction of something new that is shifting my understanding of what the role of a lecturer actually is. I had not thought about this really as I consider myself a practitioner, but the reality is I am no longer abut a lecturer and I do not have the same level of training to do that role, and probably do not understand it fully, hence any changes to my understanding of that role is provoking some discomfort.

The goal by all was to be professional, prepared, confident and in control of the learning environment. Not just an expert in their individual field but also an expert educator. The shifting identity was entangled with more than going online to deliver programmes of learning, but in also acknowledging that their identity was changing. There was, in fact, a shift in their symbolic identification when moving from a discipline-specific expert to one of lecturer, asking questions of themselves regarding what does that mean in terms of cultural, education capital and their own pre-given structures, their previous symbolic order. Within the context that professionals require a mandate for the position that they occupy and the manner in which they carry out their role (Zizek, 1989, p. 105).

It is during this transition, from one professional self to the other, that professionals may not be as confident as they would like, or know how to develop the required symbolic identification of a lecturer within higher education, who is a combination of an expert in a discipline and expert in education.

The face- to -face classroom allowed for the previous professional expertise to mask any lack of expertise in teaching practice, therefore, the tenuous nature of the symbolic order was not as evident, but this was less possible in the online space. Hence this led to the exploration of the role of the self within this study, resulting in study participants acknowledging that this new, to them, learning model required them to be more fully prepared as educators and resulted in them questioning themselves as educators.

But more importantly, this entire process has made me ask how do I become a professional educator, as confident and as good as I was as a It has also made me reflect on how can I do my job to the best of my ability and it has made me pause and think about what I am doing. Did not think that would occur. This, in fact, has brought me to bigger questions about the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education and how can we support each other (Chloe).

Leading participants to the conclusion that while online and traditional classroom teaching methods are different, they are not mutually exclusive, consequently teachers need to know how to prepare for all models to ensure successful teaching and learning for the student and for themselves (Cross, 2014). The current system does not require this expertise.

5.0 Conclusion

This self-study sought to explore the changes in practice, pedagogy and professional identity that lecturers experience while transitioning to an online space, in particular, synchronous delivery and ended with a narrative on the experience of educators during a change. Results of the study did indicate that moving to live online teaching does require practice with the use of technology, however, once competency in the technology is achieved it allowed participants to explore their pedagogy, not just within the online space but within their role as educators. This resulted in the participants acknowledging that they need to develop expertise as educators to support successful student learning. Subject expertise is important to do the role, expertise as an educator is important to do this as effectively as possible. In tandem, participants realised their identity was shifting to become an educator who was no longer satisfied being a subject expert but wished to be a professional educator. All of this brought concern and realisation that change was necessary and that the focus must be on successful teaching regardless of the learning model used recognising that “Technology does not teach students; effective teachers do” (Whitesel, 1998).

Recommendation

This small-scale study cannot be considered generalisable but provides points for consideration for those who are embarking on this journey. Findings indicate training, practice and preparation are key to a transition to an online live delivery model. But it is more than this, training to be a professional educator, regardless of the learning platform, will support successful teaching and learning for the student and for the educator.

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