The New-to-Online Instructor: Conceptions, Desires and Expectations

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a phenomenological investigation of online teaching, as experienced by six faculty members who have never taught online before. The findings demonstrate the qualitatively different (and sometimes similar) ways the participants describe their understanding and experience of online teaching and learning. Insight into these understandings and experiences is achieved through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Shared experiences were identified through a process of analysis that includes an attempt to understand the experiences and categorize them into clusters of meaning. It is concluded that faculty who are new to online teaching have conceptions, desires and expectations for their teaching experience, which come from prior knowledge as an educator.

1   Introduction

The online instructor often brings a background in teaching and expertise in the subject area to his or her online course. Through prior teaching experiences, instructors have ideas about what they desire from their teaching experience and what they may expect from students. In addition, they may already have conceptions about what online teaching and learning will be like. Studies of online teaching have established that online instructors often rely on their past teaching experience when preparing to teach online (Choi & Park, 2006; Conceicao, 2006; Conrad, 2004; Regan, et al, 2011).

Most of the literature related to online teaching and learning centers around what is or is not successful in the course, while little is written about the experiences of the online instructor. Budd (2005) defines the study of "phenomena" as that which is understood and "given", while phenomenology provides us with a framework to study the "given". In this study, we are looking at the connectedness of six instructors who are all preparing to do the same thing (teach online) to make meaning of their shared (but unrelated) experiences. It is hoped that the participants in the study can provide understanding of what the online instructor needs and wants so that services and support may be more appropriately aligned with the needs of the faculty member.

This study uncovers the conceptions, desires and expectations of six online instructors in an era where online learning is maturing. Knowing that most online instructors are experienced educators, it can be expected that faculty members individually have experiences with pedagogy and preparing course content. What about these experiences shape the choices that an instructor makes when putting a course online? Are they prepared for the different roles (that previous studies have indicated) in which the online instructor will take, such as facilitator, manager and subject matter expert? Talking to the experienced educator--but new-to-online instructor--can provide insight into the lived experience of an instructor who is putting a course online to ensure that the faculty member maintains a role in the teaching and learning process.

2   Literature Review

Conrad (2004) described the novice online instructor as one who relies heavily on traditional classroom experience with little awareness of collaborative learning. Since Conrad's research, there has been a pedagogical shift in the traditional classroom that encourages more active learning and relies on increased use of learning technologies. In addition, online learning in higher education has expanded to become more of a norm with established standards of quality. Researchers in online instruction have identified that courses which utilizes design-based approaches, such as the Quality Matters or Community of Inquiry frameworks (Swan, et al, 2012) can increase learning outcomes and performance.

2.1   Online Teaching

DeGagne and Walters (2010) used phenomenology to uncover the lived experience of the online educator and illustrated that online teaching provided rewards, flexibility and convenience for the instructor that they craved as a method for balancing work and family. In addition, this study found that online educators feel that the online course is a great deal of work and instructors want recognition from administration to support the extra labor required for putting a course online (compensation, mentoring, professional development, etc). This study also found that successful online teaching requires the instructor to have excellent communication skills, utilize a learner-centered approach and continue education and training in a different way than a traditional classroom requires. For example, two of the instructors shared that prompt, meaningful and effective feedback is crucial in the online environment since there is not a specific time and place for students to ask questions as there is in a traditional classroom (Degagne & Walters, 2010, p. 363).

2.2   Preparing the Online Course

Conceicao (2006) found that faculty teaching online experienced increased length and depth of engagement when preparing and teaching their online courses. Conceicao determined that this increase in workload centered around the need to compensate for the lack of physical interaction which could include increased time in creating and preparing materials, as well as increased time participating with students in the class. While teaching online was very rewarding, it was also a lot of work. In his discussion, Conceicao indicated that faculty could reduce their workload by working with an instructional designer who could advise them on time-saving techniques and provide development support.

2.3   The Novice Instructor

Choi and Park (2006) studied the faculty perspective towards putting a course online to uncover whether the online teaching experience was truly a burden as previous research indicated. Through five weeks of observation, Choi and Park did find that online teaching was burdensome for the new online instructor in this case study. It was hard for the instructor to know how to motivate online student and best organize communication in the online environment. The authors recommended that faculty support in the form of training, instructional design, and development would have made it easier for the new online instructor to be successful.

3   Method

3.1   Study Design

This study was designed using the phenomenological method to understand more about the lived experience of the faculty member who was preparing to teach online for the first time. In phenomenological research, the goal is to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the experience of teaching online for the first time is examined through the eyes of six faculty members who were teaching in the same program at the same University. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect experiences from the participants.

While we often have our own experiences with the phenomena, we must also be able to set prejudgments and preconceptions aside to understand the experience from the individual's perspective (Moustakas, 1994). This process, referred to as the *epoche* (also referred to as bracketing in the analysis process), provides us with a chance to examine our own beliefs, feelings and desires before examining the essence of the phenomenon. For this research, I engaged in a process of "transcendental phenomenological reduction" to examine online teaching as I assume it to be. The process included pre-reflection, reflection, and reduction to define and analyze the nature of teaching online.

3.2   Description of Sample

Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that phenomenological studies include between 5 and 25 participants. For this study, six faculty members who would soon be teaching online for the first time were selected using a criterion-based method to participate in the study. Criterion sampling was selected to ensure the quality and richness of the data (Patton, 2001). The criteria specified that each participant must be a

faculty member (tenured or tenure-track, non-tenure track or adjunct) from the same university who is preparing a course to teach online for the first time. Of the participants, one was tenured, one was tenure-track, one was non-tenure track and three were adjuncts. All participants had at least two years of experience teaching traditional courses at the higher education level. One participant had prepared an online course before but had never taught online. One participant had taken an online course as a student. While most of the participants would be teaching their online course within two weeks of the interview, there were two who were not planning to teach their online course for six months at the time of the interview. One other commonality that all existed between all participants was that they all had worked with an instructional designer to design their courses.

3.3   Data Collection Procedure

After the study was approved by the Institutional Research Board, participants were identified and invited by email to participate in an hour long interview in the location of their choice. As an instructional designer who works with faculty to put their courses online, I was able to select participants who met the criteria and invite them to participate in the study. After participants agreed to join the study, each participant was provided with an informed consent form and information about the study. Interviews consisted of a mix of standard demographic questions and semi-structured questions related to the research questions in the study. The research questions were: 1.) How do faculty describe their experiences of preparing an online course? 2.) How do participants understand and make sense of the online teaching experience? 3.) What differences and similarities do faculty share when reflecting on the experience of preparing to teach online?

3.4   Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2013) recommends that phenomenological studies include a discussion about the role of the researcher as part of the process of *imaginative variation* that may identify how certain situations may influence the researcher during the study. Creswell states that reflecting on the role of the researcher can also be used as a validation strategy to clarify researcher bias. In this case, I am an instructional designer who has worked with the participants to design or prepare their course for the online environment. My experience with the participants may have provided some influence as to how they view online teaching and learning, and may have also influenced the level of comfort that the participant had when talking with me. Perhaps some statements, such as positive remarks about working with me, may have been said because of our relationship. For example, one participant said, "the guidance from you is extremely helpful" and another said, "I feel like I have learned so much from talking to you." In the bracketing process, these statements were removed from the analysis of the data as part of the phenomenological reduction.

3.5   Data Analysis

In a phenomenological study, the goal is to explore the phenomenon through a group of individuals who have experience with it (Creswell, 2013). This analysis began after the interviews were complete by bracketing my own experience out of the data analysis process so that I could focus on the experience of the participants when looking at their experiences. I did this by writing my own reflection on online instruction, then reflecting on what I understood about each participant.

In the first phase of data analysis, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and loaded into the cloud-based, qualitative research software analysis program called Dedoose. Significant statements from the interviews were highlighted and marked as an "excerpt" in Dedoose, a process which Moustakas (1994) refers to as *horizontalization*. These statements were placed into meaning units related to the research questions, then clustered into categories.

In the second phase of data analysis, the statements within each category were analyzed for themes. Themes were then color-coded to identify the emergence of themes that were common between all of the participants. The content of these statements were analyzed for similarities, differences and uniqueness to determine the essence of preparing to teach online.

Finally, the data was validated using the member checking process. Participants were asked to review their transcripts and my interpretation of the findings. Through this process, several themes were changed or discovered with participant input.

4 Findings

The experience of preparing to teach online, as perceived by the participants in this study, extended beyond the process of designing their course to encompass the entire process of instruction. As one participant said, "The number one thing that I want to happen is that students will learn." Participants imagined what their students would be like, why they would take the class and even described what benefits they thought would come to them from teaching online. Participants felt that teaching online had the same outcome as the traditional course (learning), even though their perceptions, needs and assumptions revolved around how teaching online would be different than in the classroom. To present the findings, the data is clustered into three categories: conceptions, desires and expectations of the online teaching experience. Within those categories, themes emerged that were consistent across each participant.

Conceptions	Desires	Expectations
Online students are unique	Institutional and departmental support	Technical problems
Colleagues as support	Flexible and reliable technology	Student dishonesty
Rethinking of instruction	Develop teaching portfolio	Student success

Table 1: Initial clustering of themes.

4.1 Conceptions of the Online Course

The first category clusters participant's conceptions of the online course. Participants most frequently talked about how the online course was different than the traditional face-to-face course, including how interaction, assessment and feedback look differently when presented online.

4.1.1 Theme: Online students are unique.

Each participant described how the online student was different than the student in the traditional classroom, however each participant described the needs of the online student differently. Some recognized that the online student was one that needed flexibility, while another participant thought the online student didn't have any other options for getting an education:

> "I guess there are some people who just can't go to a classroom. I think if you had a chance to go to a classroom, people would do that instead of taking a class online. Everyone's circumstances are different."

4.1.2 Theme: Online instructors can benefit from talking with other colleagues.

Each participant also described how other faculty in their department or field have influenced their thinking about online instruction and could help them prepare for teaching online. In some cases, this meant that the instructor would be customizing and teaching a course that another instructor had created, while others shared their experience of talking with other faculty to learn about how to design their course. One instructor made decisions about the use of the discussion board after hearing about another's experience:

> "I have heard instructors say that they teach an online course who says it's like crickets when using the discussion board. When I talked to another online instructor, he said he hadn't gotten any emails from students so he sent out an email saying 'just wanted to check in' and nobody emailed him back. I am hoping they will utilize that but, in a way to hedge my bets on that, I am purposefully not making that a large portion of the course."

4.1.3 Theme: Teaching online requires a rethinking of instruction.

The other theme common across all participants in this category was that they all shared the conception that teaching online required them to rethink the way that they teach. Several participants indicated that prior experience teaching the course in the classroom will help them to teach online. An instructor who is experienced with the course will understand where students have questions. For an online class, addressing these questions needs to be reconsidered since instructors are not able to read body language or other cues that are useful in the classroom.

> "Thinking about my first semester teaching, it would have been a disaster if I taught online then. Just knowing now that I have to over explain some techniques as opposed to other ones is crucial to putting this course online."

4.2   Desires of the Online Instructor

In the second category, participants responded to questions about what they want and desired out of their online teaching experience. Responses that were similar amongst all participants ranged from wanting different types of support from campus administration to technical desires for the learning management system. Some themes were unique to certain populations of the instructors. For example, the adjuncts in the study were more likely to want to teach online for personal growth and future opportunities, while the full-time instructors were hoping to create additional modalities for students to take courses.

4.2.1   Theme: Online instructors want support.

Each participant mentioned various areas in which they wish they had more support, depending on their experiences. One participant who experienced trouble with student misconduct in a hybrid course wished for more support with student behavior issues. Another instructor wished for more financial support to be able to buy the computer he desired that would allow him to more easily create media for his online course. A third instructor expressed a need for support with marketing the course. The three instructors who had the least teaching experience expressed a desire for more training to learn to use the online teaching tools more efficiently.

> "I guess that I wish there was a little more help with the publicity side of it somewhere, because I don't know the right way to do it so I was just going to different organizations and trying to publicize it and doing presentations and that. Whereas someone in publicity would have much stronger knowledge of what needs to be done."

> "I need that laptop/tablet that we talked about. I need that to be able to write on presentations and to have better notes and better presentations. I think I have everything else as far as technology goes."

> "Online training should do more like the Campus Writing program. They do a faculty workshop every semester. They do one for faculty and TA's where they actually pay people to go."

4.2.2   Theme: Online instructors want flexibility and reliability in the Learning Management System (LMS).

All participants discussed the way that they hoped the technology would work while they are teaching their course. One participant stated, "I am hoping that it's a well-oiled machine. Now that I have set it up, I am hoping that it will run itself". However, each participant expressed the desire to have a problem-free teaching experience, hoping not to have any problems with the technology.

Participants also discussed the desire to have more flexibility in the LMS, including more opportunities for customizing, creating settings, changing the appearance and adding tools. One participant described the desire to be more creative with the way her Blackboard course looks:

> "The only thing I feel constrained about is the design. Like the icons, I wish there was more creativity there. Like, if you add an item it's always the same module image. I wish there was a photo or something that you could be more creative with. I feel constrained in the visual format."

One instructor even chose to go outside of the LMS to find the tool that she needed to provide the learning experience that she wished students to have. She shared her reasons for choosing a blogging tool on the web instead of one provided within Blackboard:

> "I felt like the Blackboard blogs were clunky and that there were a lot more options available. So my blogs are password protected so we still have the privacy of a classroom setting. It is also an education blog site, so they could take that knowledge back to their classroom and use it when they become teachers."

4.2.3   Theme: Online instruction will expand one's teaching portfolio.

One theme was unique to the participants who were teaching online as adjuncts. They shared that they hope the online teaching experience makes them more employable and expands their teaching portfolio.

One of these participants said, "I feel like having experience with online courses will be a benefit to me when I go into the job market."

Another participant shared that his sole motivation for teaching online was for the experience of opening up global employment opportunities:

> "I think a face to face approach is better, but I also know that the world is changing and more universities are leading towards this and I have seen a couple of job posts that require online teaching so I am hoping that by doing this I will gain some experience and probably gain a little more chances of actually getting a job here or anywhere. I mean not just in the United States. Universities are offering online degrees so it will make me more marketable so that is what I am hoping for."

4.3   Expectations of the Online Course

What does the online instructor expect from their teaching experience? What do they expect from their students? In this category, several themes emerged that explained what the participants were expecting would happen while they were teaching the class.

4.3.1   Theme: There will be technical problems.

All participants expressed that there would be some sort of technical problem in their course. Some participants thought the problems would be self-created, some thought there would be problems with the system and some thought the students would have technical problems. Regardless of the reason for the computer problem, each instructor was taking precautions in their syllabus statement and course planning to prepare for handling the technical problems when they arose. As one participant said:

> "I am trying to start out as strict as possible, putting as much language in there as possible to make sure the technology works that they have a secure internet connection, and that if something does go wrong that it is not my fault, that it is part of an online course that they agree to when they sign up for this course."

4.3.2   Theme: There will be student dishonesty.

All participants expressed concerns about students being dishonest with them in an online setting. Some expected that students would use their books or the Internet while taking exams, other students would take tests together or share answers, and instructors would be misled by students trying to deceive them. One participant explained that he expected students would work together on exams and was taking safeguards against that:

> "In an online setting it is possible that they could be taking the quizzes together. I know there are safeguards against that, like randomized questions and order. One thing I am doing is randomized order of questions with my exams. I am also giving them a limited amount of time which I am hoping will give them enough time to complete the exams, but not enough time beyond that where they can go through each question and look up the answer to every question. Or if they are taking it with someone else, they won't have a lot of time to discuss questions. I do know that ultimately I am not going to be able to stop cheating, and that if they really want to they will find a way, whether it is an online or face-to-face course. But that is definitely a concern I have had about the online format is that it is easier to cheat."

4.3.3   Theme: Students will do well.

All of the instructors expected their students to do well in the online course. The participants provided input on what they considered to be success and indicated they expected students to: have grades comparable to the face-to-face courses, communicate with instructors, participate regularly and show evidence of critical thinking. However, a few participants expressed that some students would not take the course seriously since it was online. "Obviously I expect them to do their work and take the class seriously. Sometimes I feel like they don't take online courses seriously, 'oh it's just online'".

5   Discussion

The subject of this research is the "thing" that is "online teaching" as experienced by the novice online instructor. The themes that emerged in this study indicate that teaching online offers new experiences that may help faculty to grow as educators, including rethinking instruction, the needs of students and learning to use new teaching tools. De Gagne and Walters (2010) demonstrated that the online instructor needs support and assistance from administration to both develop and teach the online course. This

study shows that it may be even more important for the new-to-online instructor to have campus resources that support the online teaching endeavor to guide them through the new world they are experiencing.

Also uncovered in this study is the essence that the online instructor may understand more about what they are getting into than phenomenological studies from the past indicate. For example, the instructors in this study all described experiences of planning for an increased workload, planning strategies for dealing with technical and conduct issues, and the expectation that online learning is a growing field. They also indicated an understanding of learner-centeredness and social presence as key factors in teaching online. Perhaps instructors are more aware of the issues and best practices related to online instruction than they were a decade ago and are better equipped for staving off potential pitfalls.

Some of the statements regarding working with an instructional designer were removed from the findings to understand more about the lived experience of the online instructor without including potential bias. However, there are implications to the fact that faculty mentioned their experience in working with an instructional designer. In Conceicao's phenomenological study (2006), he noted, "participants did not refer to the assistance of instructional designers in the development of their online courses even though most of the participants described their experiences as positive" (p. 43). In this study, all participants had worked with an instructional designer, yet none of them described the increased workload of putting a course online as a negative experience. The participants were fairly positive about their experiences putting a course online and used words like "rewarding", "exciting" and "eye-opening" to describe their experience, while also recognizing that the new experience could be "scary", and make them "nervous" and "uncertain". Perhaps instructional designers can serve a role in reducing anxiety towards teaching online, as well as supporting faculty by connecting them with campus resources, sharing time-saving techniques and providing training for technology.

This is the preliminary study of a larger research effort to understand the needs of online instructors. This project will be expanded to study the lived experiences of six, experienced online faculty. Follow up efforts will be made with the initial six participants after they have completed their online teaching experience to examine if it went as they thought and hoped it would. This preliminary study indicates that the faculty who teach online courses for the first time do indeed have expectations and conceptions about how the course will go and use that experience to design the course. Did the online teaching experience go as they thought it would? Were their conceptions and expectations correct? What would they change for next time? Follow up research will be done to continue to examine the new-to-online instructor's experience in online teaching.

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7   Table of Tables