

The Experience of A First-time Online Cultural Studies Instructor: A Case Study

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Abstract—With enrollment in online courses continuing to rise, student learning and satisfaction have become the focus of a growing body of research. However, the first-time online instructor experience has not been as widely investigated. This study examines the experience of Pamela, a first-time online Cultural Studies instructor, through a series of interviews conducted throughout the semester in order to track her progression at four points in the semester. It also seeks to determine what factors the first-time online instructor perceives to have the greatest impact on course creation and teaching strategies, namely the nature of the Cultural Studies course as implemented online, Pamela's digital immigrant mindset and growth throughout the semester, best practices and constraints in distance education, and the results of best practice.

Keywords-first-time; online instructor; Cultural Studies; case study

I. INTRODUCTION

As a growing number of students are completing all or a part of their education online, questions have arisen as to whether distance learning offers the same level of quality as face-to-face classes. The student experience and their academic performance have been the focus of various studies, but relatively few investigations have sought to understand the transformation that online instructors must undergo as they make the transition to the digital classroom. While studies have shown no difference between student performance in a traditional class and an online class, faculty do often report concerns, such as difficulty in keeping up with the necessary technology. Instructors, particularly digital immigrants, must grapple with how to redefine themselves in this new context as they encounter the challenges of teaching in this manner. They are often worried that they will not enjoy the experience as much as they do in a face-to-face class, that they are not equipped technologically, and that the process will be too time consuming. Additionally, student apathy and an inability to measure engagement are concerns. This study follows Pamela, a first-time online instructor, as she teaches a college level cultural studies course. Pamela's progression from being a self-described technology neophyte to a proponent of the online learning environment is measured via four interviews conducted at several points throughout the semester. Through an analysis of her remarks, the study also attempts to determine what factors Pamela perceives to have the greatest impact on the creation of her course and her teaching strategies.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Distance Education and Online Learning

In recent years, the focus of distance education has shifted towards defining and assessing quality delivery methods [1, 2]. This is not surprising as some educational facilities can see in excess of 100,000 students per academic year, and distance education is providing an effective means of meeting the rising demands [3]. Moreover, distance education continues to prove its usefulness in poverty-stricken and developing countries with low socio-economic status [4]. In both these scenarios, distance education provides a mode of instructional delivery that alleviates the need for the traditional classroom, thus lowering the cost of education, while simultaneously easing the students' restrictions of scheduling and availability demands.

Research [1, 4] has also shown that the mode of instructional delivery does not inherently affect student performance in a given course; rather, the use of applicable educational and cognitive artifacts are the predominant factors that impact student performance. As [5] suggests, "Web 2.0 technologies encourage patterns of informal learning that might have an impact on the formal classroom environment" (p. 95). For example, students who use Google Search outside the classroom would certainly be more apt to use this tool inside the classroom because of their familiarity with it.

Over time, distance education has been defined and redefined, and today, distance education is most commonly associated with online learning, or e-learning. The common denominator throughout all the various definitions is that students are at a distance from the educator, and they must use some form of technology (e.g., computer, television, etc.) to interact with the instructional materials [1]. This delivery mode allows access to information to those students who are either working full-time and are unable to physically meet for instruction, or those students who would otherwise be denied the opportunity to learn at all [6].

While distance education certainly has a plethora of benefits, it also has its share of pitfalls. Some feel that distance education—in particular online education—is overused and is "merely a substitute for 'real'" learning [6]. Another issue arises when researchers and educators use "crude hypothetical constructs—terms like 'distance', 'independence', and 'interaction'" in generalized and vague contexts [6]. This ties

back to the overarching dilemma with distance education, in that it is still an ambiguous mode of instruction whose success is entirely dependent on the faculty and students. As technology continues to move forward, as a study conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) found, roughly two-thirds of college and university educators claim that staying up-to-speed with information technology is more strenuous than "research/publishing demands, teaching load, and the tenure/promotion [process]" [7].

B. *Transitioning from Traditional to Online Instruction*

As a study conducted by [8] found, faculty users not only misrepresent their proficiency with a learning management system (LMS), but also misrepresent the overall effectiveness of the tools they use in an online setting. One participant in the study suggested that this result is from faculty users expecting "the same outcomes from both and I don't think you can expect the same teaching outcomes from an online course and from a classroom course. And I think if you try to do that, you're going to be disappointed" [8]. The role of faculty in online courses is to be less of an instructor and more of a tutor: the students must interact with the material on their own, engaging the faculty as a guide more than an authority [9].

As another study concluded, "more satisfied online instructors had a 'high level of interaction with online students'" [10]. Satisfaction plays a tremendous role in the quality of instruction, thus impacting student outcomes. Other characteristics that deeply affect faculty effectiveness in online courses include (a) temporal and physical distances, (b) thorough planning and continuous feedback, and (c) the overall "pace of delivery...must be controlled" [11]. Researchers have argued in favor of each characteristic as being the paramount trait that affects faculty effectiveness, yet agree that all of them exist to some capacity.

In short, faculty is "being asked to use a new process to get the same results" [12]. Even still, for faculty members who embrace the changes that are required when transitioning from the face-to-face to the online environment, they will find that it leads "to successful learning for [their] students in a relevant anytime-anywhere format" [12]. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges during the transition is the ability "to make the technology transparent," so the focus is thus redirected back to learning [12].

Yet, even with the focus redirected back to learning, faculty teaching online courses have found that the digital mode of delivery can seem restrictive [13,14,15,16]. The simplified explanation is a lack of personal interaction, as one participant in [13]'s study conveyed in comical fashion: "In face-to-face I recognize when people are sleeping, or people [are] fading out, I can adjust my teaching. But I think with technology, they might hide a little bit because they can".

C. *First-time Faculty User's Experiences*

Relatively few studies have looked at distance education from the first-time faculty user's point of view [17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24]. There is a need to understand the trials and tribulations that a first-time faculty user experiences during the creation of a distance education course, usually facilitated

through a learning management system (LMS) [24]. A few key areas make up the majority of troubles that faculty users face when making the transition from traditional to online learning, so understanding how they 're-create' themselves, in terms of both identity and pedagogy, is crucial [25]. Reference [25], who study the changes in teacher identity when making the switch, find that many of their participants "[are] uncertain if they would feel the same enjoyment they had come to know with teaching face-to-face classes" (p. 151). In another study by [20], they examine three teachers making the transition for the first time, and once again, teacher identity is an important factor for at least one participant:

The surprising thing was how [the course] tested and questions my own confidence as a teacher and really what teaching is all about anyway. What are you really doing when you are teaching? What is the value of your contribution in the whole thing? I don't know.

The technology aspect of online teaching is perhaps the greatest challenge that the novice faculty user will encounter. Even teachers who marked their capability with technology as high can face quandaries when tackling an LMS [8]. Perhaps the most common barrier to understanding the technology and using it to create an online course is time:

One instructor stated that online courses are not easier and if they're done right they do not take less time than actual face-to-face meetings. It might be more convenient for both the instructor and the students, but they still take a lot of time. [8]

As [26] highlights, the ability to choose an LMS that is designed for a specific subject "relieves some of the initial pressure of curricular development" (p. 7). However, in most cases, especially in higher education, the school will already have an LMS in place for faculty, e.g. BlackBoard, D2L, etc.

Further challenging the instructor is the actual mode of delivery: is the class meeting synchronously or asynchronously? Asynchronous online courses have added challenges, in that the faculty do not actual 'meet' with the students. As [17] find in their study, even online courses that meet synchronously, but through a medium that does not offer video or audio, can be subject to "student apathy" (p. 318). "Student apathy," as suggested by one of their participants, is a challenge because the educator could not determine "whether [the students] are truly there mentally as well as physically because I would imagine that there is some degree of invisibility attached to it" [17].

With this in mind, we seek to not only verify prior claims made by researchers who studied first-time online instructors, but also to break down these implications into easy-to-swallow themes. Our case study has two guiding questions: 1) What is the progression of a first-time online instructor throughout the semester? 2) What factors does the first-time online instructor perceive to have the greatest impact on course creation and teaching strategies?

III. METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study was that of a qualitative case study, whereby Pamela, the “single case” [27], was interviewed by Kristina four times during the 16-week Spring 2016 semester, namely before the semester began, during Weeks 5 and 10, and after the semester ended. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, read through to discover general themes, and coded using the qualitative research software, NVivo 10 [28], based on the previously discovered themes and arising themes. Then excerpts were selected. The codes and their references in descending order are:

Name	Sources	References
Time constraints and prioritizing	4	19
Online and F2F experience informing each other	4	14
Student-Professor Interaction	3	14
Instructor presence	4	11
Best practices and pedagogy	3	10
Quality of student work	3	10
Instructor Personality	4	10
Digital immigrant mindset-Prensky	4	9
Cultural Studies Content	4	9
Assessment	3	8
D2L Layout	2	7
Class size	4	6
Visual voice	3	6
Collaborative assignments	3	6
Online format is more efficient	2	6
Learning D2L	2	6
E-teaching and showing MVL D2L features	3	6
Constantly learning about technology and professional development	3	6
Process of designing an online course	1	6
Clarity of Expectations	3	6
Difficulties of creating online courses	3	5
Student Interaction	3	5
Student readiness for online courses	3	4
Motivation for going online	2	4
Synchronous	2	3
Advantages of digital technology	1	2
Humanizing the online classroom	2	2
Difficulties of online courses	2	2
Different ways to create online courses	1	1
History of how DE was strongly encouraged	1	1

Figure 1. Codes and references in descending order.

The participant-researchers, Pamela and Kristina, were colleagues in the same department in a mid-sized university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Pamela, a first-time online instructor, was teaching Cultural Studies, one of three core courses in the online Masters of Arts in Languages and Cultures (MALC), where students specialized in the French, German, or Spanish languages.

IV. FINDINGS

The main findings are examined from the following perspectives: Cultural Studies course, Pamela, Kristina, best practices in distance education, constraints in distance education, and results of best practice.

A. Cultural Studies Course

The course, designed in a 16-week collaboration with an instructional designer, consisted of 13 modules, namely:

- 1) What is Cultural Studies?
- 2) Culture and Identity Politics,

- 3) Politics of Self-Representation,
- 4) Politics of Representation,
- 5) Cultural Studies Project,
- 6) Identity Politics and Gender,
- 7) Vocabulary Quiz I,
- 8) Culture and Media Representations I,
- 9) Culture and Media Representations II,
- 10) Culture and Media Representations III,
- 11) Local and Global Identity,
- 12) Online Presentations, and
- 13) Online Presentations.

It is obvious from a consideration of the modules that “it’s a very progressive, progression driven course ... the material from module three feeds into your success with module four.”

Although the impetus of the study was a focus on the experience of Pamela, a first-time online instructor, the course itself merited discussion (*Cultural Studies Content* - 9 references), including the assignments given:

- “student bios” where students “interrogate their own identity,”
- “interrogate ... your favorite childhood toy” while considering “Did it, like, did it gender them?”
- a collaborative construction of a “cultural studies vocabulary” list from which two quizzes would be created—this assignment created problems resulting in Pamela wondering “how to make more overt process ... in a group project,”
- “critical response to The Help,”
- “[10 minute] final audio visual project,” and
- “final written ... project.”

The nature of Cultural Studies also received attention:

I think some of this material is going to be really hard for them because of the need to look at yourself ... and your biases And so, it can become sort of confrontational with yourself, and then they get angry and they angrily write their papers and stuff, which is great, because then there’s process going. I’m fine with it. I usually have a lot of angry white men or very teary eyed, guilty white men, coming into my office like...you know “I can’t believe this was going on.” See, you know, white amazement, black rage, fear. The things I’m going to have them read are gonna have to...they have to look at themselves.

Another aspect of the course that received attention in the interviews were the students in the course. On the one hand, students were engaging with the material as indicated in the excerpt above, or not engaging with the material, as follows:

He’s very descriptive and non-critical and non-analytical ... and his opinions are very conservative ... and cultural studies is a very progressive ... method ... so there’s this clash in his content and the rest of the class ... nobody is interested in responding to his posts because ... they’re kind of absurd ... they’re just very descriptive.

On the other hand, there was the issue of the lack of English language proficiency on the part of a few students, which occurred because the MALC attracted native speakers of French, German, and Spanish, some of whom were international students entering the program with English language proficiency problems.

B. Pamela

Pamela was a unique individual with an entertaining turn-of-phrase (*Instructor Personality* - 10 references). She shared her journey of “how [she] came over to the dark side,” explaining that the distance education mandate (History of How DE was Strongly Encouraged - 1 reference) “[came] at us from the administration” and encountered initial resistance even with financial remuneration. Her *Motivation for Going Online* (4 references) was “curiosity and a willingness to offer what I feel is a form of service ... to sort of advancing the goals of the department and the programs.” She reiterated, “I’m a willing victim.”

Even after Pamela decided to venture into distance education, she typified a *Digital Immigrant Mindset* [29] via some entertaining comments (9 references):

- “The square eyeballs from spending so much time on the computer really upsets me.”
- “It’s like magic, I mean information can just fly and whip around in a way that an animal like me who’s born and raised in the twentieth century, the pre-digital age, that things just didn’t go that fast.”
- “You’re really connected to the computer as...almost like a baby bottle. Like it’s...all the sustenance is there.”
- “The cloud to me is so scary ... like where does it go?”
- “I just click on things and hope for the best.”
- “It feels a bit de-humanized.”

Having said that, however, there was a definite progression in Pamela’s online teaching development. As suggested above, and reiterated with “D2L has been pretty unwieldy for me ... that’s how neophyte-y I am,” later interviews revealed:

- “I find it very stimulating to engage with the platform, it’s very exciting every time I log on and I see my course online in this extraordinarily colorful, well laid out, linear, logical manner.”
- “I just I’m really surprised that I keep finding the online format just as efficient if not more so than in class.”
- “Very time-consuming but more enjoyable. ... I was really engaged with their work and then my feedback was less subjective. It was less about them at all or trying to make them comfortable. [Kristina: Interesting. So, basically what you’re seeing more of is their product rather than the person.]”

- “And I feel for them. I’m surprised that I feel as deep a connection as I do to each one of the students in this course. I mean, I thought it was going to be so different from a face-to-face course and it’s ... it’s only slightly different. ... On an emotional level. ... my investment in this course has been a 100%. I haven’t felt distanced by the technology. Just put out sometimes ... and helped sometimes.”

C. Kristina

Because Pamela and Kristina were department colleagues, there was more personal interaction occurring than would be expected between interviewer and interviewee. Even with having distance education as her research agenda and having taught online since 2008, Kristina was still only moderately tech-savvy. While Kristina was able to show Pamela how to do certain things in D2L (*E Teaching and Showing MVL D2L Features* - 6 references) like using the Dropbox to comment on student work, keeping track of the number of discussion posts and replies, and copying threads from one forum to another, Pamela’s course, because she availed herself of instructional designer services, had features that Kristina’s course did not, like “not allowing [students] to read other people’s posts ... until they’ve posted.” In addition, Kristina, perhaps because she had taught online for multiple years, had distinct pedagogical beliefs about online education, for instance, she preferred to save time by commenting on discussion posts rather than grading them, explaining:

To me, it’s not worth the (time)... I control the quality of the work by...by talking to the student, so I will say things like, you know, student X can you elaborate on this? And so, so that’s how I control it, not by evaluating, but by interacting. ... I personally am not willing to put in that time because I feel that my time could be better spent in other ways ... [Pamela: But even interacting with them ... just would be very time-consuming, but maybe ... more pleasurable].

Kristina invested the time saved into *Online Synchronous Chats* (3 references):

I insist on it, even though it sucks up my time. Um, because I believe that it is, you know, because it’s my field of research, I believe that it’s pedagogically um... pedagogically advantageous for there to be synchronous sessions ... Even though it takes away the convenience factor because it’s like, they still have to be there 1 hour per week, you know?

D. Best Practices in Distance Education

Pamela recommended that a new online instructor “start as early as possible designing the course working with the designer. That was the best advice I got ... The sooner you can tinker with it, the better.” An element that went into the *Process of Designing an Online Course* (6 references) included (also coded at *Learning D2L* – 6 references):

[The instructional designer] suggested I explain basically what’s happening here, the content, what materials they need to engage with and then ... assessment ... it’s kind of

a scary word, and these are the things they need to do ... and I put in bold and I...I learned...I learned this that you have to use very, very active words ... but that it's something that people who teach online have to learn to use.

Pamela also stressed the importance of *Instructor Presence* (11 references), leveraged perhaps through (as shared in an email):

It might have helped that I offered two videos online where I was "my f2f self", speaking to ... the students as if to them in person. ... I found it quite easy to pretend that they were right there, and that everything I said and the way I said it, including inflection, enthusiasm and delight with their work was very important. Perhaps the taste of this carried through in our written correspondence. So those two videos that I recorded seem to be essential to the success of that connection with the students, to our teacher presence online.

Instructor presence in the form of student support would have been particularly important to some English language learners:

The non-native speaking nationals freak out a little bit, they miss certain points ... and I can understand that. And so students...so, that's why I'm sort of 24/7 on email with them because I understand that they...each person needs individual clarification and attention. I wouldn't want to teach this way semester after semester ... because it's exhausting.

E. Constraints in Distance Education

Time is a monumental constraint in distance education (*Time Constraint and Prioritizing* – 19 references) in terms of course design:

it's just taken me forever to build this course, even with all this tech help. I didn't put any of this material up, this was all the tech designer but I put it all in place, per what he showed me a module looks like ... And that took me forever! (also coded at *Difficulties of Creating Online Courses* – 5 references)

and engaging with the site, "I find that I have to engage with the site almost daily ... as well as email. I feel...I feel like a 24/7 teacher with this course." Exacerbating the time constraint issue was the large *Class Size* (6 references) with 21 students in the course. Also related to the time constraint was Pamela's effort to grade D2L discussion posts (*Assessment* – 8 references), "Cause it's almost like I'm trying to meet with them 3 times a week through their work ... and I can't...I can't keep up ... with my other stuff."

Another constraint, or problem, Pamela experienced was the difficulty with managing online collaborative work (*Collaborative Assignments* – 6 references):

Where the real issue came in was the second group project collaborative vocabulary lists. Each person was supposed to submit their top 10, that they felt like, really spoke to them and I got a lot of negative feedback on process like, haven't heard from 2 of our 4 ... group members, I really wanted to let you know that there was nothing submitted

from this person. ... I am all ears as far as how to make more overt process ... in a group project.

F. Results of Best Practice

An online course, well designed and implemented, should result in good *Quality of Student Work* (10 references), which occurred in Pamela's course. Pamela shared:

What surprises me is the quality of engagement on the majority of the students and the quality of the work. ... There's an attention to detail, which I thought might fall away and become sloppy because they're not handing things in to a person. So, you know, they're just throwing things up ... But I don't get the feeling that they're just getting, like on their thread and writing. ... there's threads and then there's usually a Dropbox component ... where they are handing in a paper ... and those are always absolutely stellar. ... it's surprising me the quality of engagement and then production and also timeliness.

In addition to the quality of student work, Pamela found the "online format just as efficient if not more so than in class" and added, "I'm not a very structured teacher and so the technology gives me the structure or organization."

V. IMPLICATIONS

In this study, time constraints [8] were referenced the most (19 times). Therefore, one way to think about the implications of this study is to consider the prioritization of elements within different categories of distance education.

A. Content and Design Implications

When it comes to design as it pertains to this Cultural Studies course, collaboration with an instructional designer as early as possible was emphasized. Even then, however, four elements were stressed, firstly, designing for assignments, particularly collaborative assignments such as the "cultural studies vocabulary" list, which included "how to make more overt [the] process [of working] in a group project" was prioritized. A second priority was the inculcation of critical- and analytical-thinking within the online environment—What would this look like in an online Cultural Studies course? Thirdly, because time is a finite commodity, it may be the case that the time taken to assess discussion posts might be better or more pleasurably used in online synchronous chats. Fourthly, a definite time-saving measure would be to limit class size, the optimal number of which would be a conversation between instructors and administrators, but certainly lower than the 21 students that the instructor in the current study had to teach.

B. Instructor Implications

The personality of the instructor (10 references) featured greatly in this study. On the one hand, the instructor was very much a digital immigrant [29]. However, there is a new generation of online instructors entering academia who are digital natives, and certainly, many online students are digital natives. How will this inform future online instructor training? Will the increase in digital-native instructors encourage the development and use of time-saving devices and apps?

Digital native/digital immigrant nature aside, the personality of the instructor was leveraged through the incorporation of videos where the instructor was her “face-to-face self,” thereby increasing teacher presence and rapport with students.

C. Language Implications

Because of the greater possibility that students in this course would be English language learners, the instructor found it necessary to be available “24/7,” which would not be manageable in the long term. As such, ideas of how the online environment could be leveraged to support and develop students’ English language proficiency could be considered.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, higher levels of interaction with students lead to more satisfied online instructors and this, in turn, can influence student outcomes. Given that thorough planning, providing frequent feedback and controlling the overall pace of delivery are key components of effective online instruction, the use of an instructional designer and enabling features such as limiting students’ ability to view discussion posts until they have posted creates an environment that is more conducive to fostering engagement. Designing assignments, especially collaborative ones, with clear objectives enhances the quality of work produced by students and a strong instructor presence can help mitigate apathy.

The personality of the first-time online instructor as well as the nature of the course matters. In Pamela’s case, she faced the challenge of encouraging and measuring critical thinking with respect to the learning objectives of a cultural studies course. To address her concerns of providing meaningful feedback as well as the time constraints that she faced, several changes would have made her transition smoother. Instead of grading discussion posts, she could have provided feedback via comments. A one hour per week synchronous class session might have enhanced her instructor presence and allowed her to be in contact with students to ensure that no one was “lost”. Limiting the class size would also have enabled her to hone in on students with language deficiencies and address any issues with student performance more immediately. In spite of her initial reluctance and encountering some unanticipated challenges during the semester, Pamela reported that she found the online format to be just as efficient as a face-to-face class. She enjoyed the experience and was able to develop a connection with her students as well as to provide more objective feedback on their work.

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