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Instructors’ transformations during early online teaching experiences

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Abstract

Use of online learning environments became popular through the opportunities that internet technologies provide. However, most of instructors have only some assumptions and beliefs about teaching online in a lack of prior knowledge or experience. Transformative learning occurs when they critically reflect on and revise these, and change their actions. Transformative learning is essential for instructors especially in technology-affiliated learning environments. The study is designed as a qualitative case study. The purpose is analyzing and presenting instructors’ transformational experiences in online learning environments. © 2010 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.

Keywords: Distance education; online learning; transformative learning; transformation.

1. Introduction

Increase of internet usage for education also requires instructors to have necessary knowledge and skills about online teaching. In online learning, instructors have a role in the processes such as content preparation, material design, lecturing and facilitation. However, prior to technical knowledge and skills, instructors’ points of view about distance and online teaching, their presuppositions and beliefs can have influence on the success of the system. Having such experiences in distance and online system can change the perceptions and opinions of individuals. In order to talk about a transformative learning, this change should be irreversible.

Distance education programs are being developed in universities. Both the number and the type of these programs increase. In Anadolu University, Open Education Faculty is responsible for performing the design, production and delivery phases. Besides, other Faculties have some roles, generally such as content providing and providing facilitators. However, these faculty members often have only face-to-face lecturing experiences and generally don’t have detailed knowledge about distance education and distance education processes. Due to university’s new online programs, they take a nearly 1-hour lasting training for each process, one focusing more on the usage of technical features of software that is used for facilitator service, the other about the format and properties of the content which is usually called e-scenario. Trainers are Open Education Faculty members. In this phase instructors’ perspectives about distance education are not known and the differences between face-to-face and online environments (e.g. learner-instructor roles, learner characteristics, interaction) are not explained.

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The research question guiding this study was what were the assumptions, beliefs and perspectives that faculty members had about the online education system before their online experiences and how did those change after their experiences. This is considered in the frame of current online system including online content preparation, online learning presentation environments, facilitating process, preparing and evaluating the assignments and the role as an instructor. The purpose is analyzing and presenting instructors’ transformational experiences in online learning environments.

2. Online Learning System and Processes

For online programs, course books are prepared as the main materials, they are in printed format. In addition, based on the development phase of instructional design model, content expert prepares the course content, course designer designs the pages/screens and then course is produced for online environment by application team. Content (e-scenario) is prepared in Word document format and it includes text, test, exercises, open-ended questions, hints, attention, reading texts, definitions for short video shoots and sometimes suggestions for images and animations. For online facilitation services, a virtual classroom environment is used. In this environment, audio, video and text can be used. Instructors can answer students’ questions using various interaction tools. Announcements, important links can be published. Facilitation service is active 2 or 3 hours a week for each course at particular times. The considered program in this study also has a face-to-face laboratory application at the end of two semesters lasting for one month.

3. Transformative Learning

Transformative learning is an adult learning theory, first introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978 (Taylor, 2008). It’s based on the thought that adults cannot trust what they believe or know because of the continuous change of circumstances (Taylor, 2008) so they criticize and learn to think for themselves rather than act upon the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings and judgments of others (Mezirow, 2003). There is a well-known saying of Aldous Huxley:"Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you do with what happens to you". Similar to his point of view, transformative learning is about interpretations of experiences. According to Mezirow (2003), this process has much to do with how we come to associate our experiences with our personal need for justification, validity and a convincing real sense of self. Taylor (2008) mentions that transformative learning theory explains the learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world.

Mezirow (2003) identifies the phases of transformative learning as follows: “
1. a disorienting dilemma;
2. self- examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame;
3. a critical assessment of assumptions;
4. recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared;
5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions;
6. planning a course of action;
7. acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans;
8. provisional trying of new roles;
9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.”

“The faculty members are constructing new knowledge by interpreting what they have acquired and reinterpreting it so it makes sense to them, leading to possible perspective transformation” (Lari, 2008). In this
study, the opinions and perceptions of instructors who were teaching face-to-face for years and have had a 1-year experience of preparing content and working as a facilitator in online classes were explored.

4. Method

This study is designed as a qualitative study. In this study, participants were (6 male, 1 female) instructors from a 2-years associate degree program in a scientific field among the new online programs that started in 2009-2010 academic year. The participants were chosen based on the criteria that they both prepared content for e-learning course and worked as an online facilitator for a year. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews including open-ended questions. For analyzing the data, the audio records of interviews were listened and notes were taken for transcription. Then, data were explored to determine the codes corresponding to the phases of transformative learning.

5. Findings

According to the data analysis, findings were grouped into seven categories given below. Each category is matched with corresponding phase(s) of transformative learning. In addition emerging themes and subjects are considered within these categories. Instead of participants’ real names, P1, P2, …, P7 are used to typify them in this paper.

5.1. Assumptions about online system

Starting the considered online program was due to some policy of university management, instructors neither chose to involve nor had have a chance to refuse it. Faculty had lack of knowledge, psychological resistance, negative bias and worries before transition to online system which can be evaluated as a disorienting dilemma. None of the participants had known about the online services and online processes of the university. Just P3 had heard there are some plans of putting the learning materials on the internet and he thought that is a good idea. However, he didn’t know he would participate an online teaching process beyond that. P6 told that there had been a psychological resistance to a new work for him although he defines himself open to innovations and he had a psychological negative reaction due to potential workload. All of the participants had worried about the process. These worries are about the success of the system. P1 had been thinking this system will fail. Some of the participants believed online learning and teaching is not appropriate for science or applied science courses. P4 and P7 thought that it would be very difficult to apply this system, whereas P5 thought there would not be much workload at least for himself. Looking at the components of the system separately, some participants were worried about facilitation service, if they could use or how they would use it. Some of the participants worried whether the students would do assignments themselves or not.

5.2. Self-evaluation in the beginning of the process

Faculty’s self-evaluation in the beginning of the process can be considered in self-examination phase of transformative learning. They felt unready and ignorant, P2 couldn’t imagine how it could be and began to search both on the web and among his friends and colleagues. He explored the international examples of online programs and courses, met the staff who did such works in the university previously.

5.3. Assessment of assumptions in the process

Third phase of transformative learning is a critical assessment of assumptions. The themes that are observed in this context are adequacy of online system, and ease-difficulty delusion.
After the participants involved the process they thought the services and opportunities are very good and students need them. P4 indicated it was difficult more than he thought at the beginning, P7 also addressed the difficulty but he understood this system can be applied via using technologies effectively and allocating much time. For P2, the things which he thought would be easy (e.g. writing for course book) weren’t easy and vice versa. Participants were right about assignments, some of the students cheated.

5.4. Evaluation of transformation, experience and system in the process

Fourth phase of transformative learning is about recognition of transformation. Some evaluations of instructors in the process can be interpreted in this context. Themes related to transformation are positive perspective and internalization. Experience related themes are technology, support, time, communication, student profile, student participation, interaction, and appropriateness of applications. About system evaluation, analysis and training/orientation are the themes.

Participants explained that their thoughts and perspectives changed in a positive way through they gained experience and saw the outputs (e.g. e-course) for some of which they provide inputs (e.g. e-scenarios). P6 stated he experienced an absorption process.

P6 tried to adapt to technology. Also, instructors’ technology proficiency was low according to P7. Participants said that they learned about various things through experiencing and with the help of the experience, support and training program of Open Education Faculty. All of the participants agreed the process began suddenly and it went on very fast. P5 said there was little time to prepare the book contents and e-course contents. He realized that he should make effort continuously. Most participants stated that they couldn’t do enough academic research in their field, because this system was very time-consuming for them. P3 noted that he didn’t have difficulties during preparing the contents however some problems occurred such as wrong pronunciation of some terminology by presenter of e-course, and disagreement with the camera crew during shooting videos of laboratory experiments. P7, as well, talked about the insufficient communication with other staff. P2 expressed that online students’ goals are more explicit and they are more willing. Online teaching has advantages but this is up to student profile. He emphasized that student profile affected his teaching. In face-to-face classes he was used to lecture to students which have similar profile and level. But he realized that, students’ profile and level ranges can be quite wide in this online system. He indicated it’s an advantage that most students are working in the field, so his lecture and explanations are concrete for them. His satisfaction with the students’ participation rate and interesting questions of the students in online facilitation service increased in time. Nevertheless, most of the other participants became demotivated by the decrease of student participation and the context of their questions - not related with course content. They didn’t know the reason for this was most of the students are working. P7 felt himself passive because it was difficult to intervene at the time when necessary in this system. Interaction is not as high as in face-to-face environments. P4 mentioned about the scope of the assignments. Because assignments should be given in different weeks from other courses, they may have to contain only one unit or many units of the course. P5 thought the facilitation environment is not very appropriate for problem solving. P6 was not sure if facilitation service is really necessary or not.

P5 would prefer participating more in the decision and structuring process before the program started, he believes a more accurate analysis should have been made. P6 thought they should have had a sound training, orientation was not enough.

5.5. Suggestions and applications for practice

Participants made suggestions or they applied during the process. These can be considered through from the fifth to eight phases which are about new roles and actions. The suggestions and applications were about facilitation service, assignments, exams, teaching style and techniques, different employments.
Three of the participants thought if the facilitation service time is changed to a time after working hours, student participation will increase and it will be more useful. P6 thinks it won’t be appropriate and can cause some ethical problems. Instead of it, he suggests face-to-face meetings monthly organized but adds they may not come. P4 had a different suggestion about this issue. He thought a part of facilitation service can be made as lecturing, then recorded and delivered online, students who can’t utilize because of their working time also can benefit later. Some assignments and exams were designed open-ended in first semester, but there were many empty papers from students. Instructors tried the test format in the second semester. P2 tries to determine the level of students more instantly. Depending on their levels he arranges his speech style, pace, and so on. P1 and P7 thought a different expert should be assigned for preparing e-scenarios and maybe assignment questions. The reason is heavy and time-consuming workload. Participants also expressed that they think on how they can improve themselves, the system and applications and how they can increase attractiveness for students and they seek for these issues.

5.6. Additional benefits of the process

The ninth phase is related with competence and self-confidence, and these are provided by contribution in this study.

Participants were pleased that they wrote course books. This was nice for them and also it fulfilled Turkish source need in this level in the field. P4 indicated some of the course books written for this program can be used as supplementary books in on-campus programs. Also, faculty members from other universities wanted to use them as textbooks in their courses. P6 told it’s also useful that it can be accessible on web. In addition, terminology of this field in Turkish is gained by this means.

5.7. New perspectives or behaviors

Corresponding to the last phase of transformative learning, findings show that participants gained new perspectives about online system and online teaching after their experience. Positive perspective, integrative perspective, reintegration is observed.

Participants found the system useful, necessary and appropriate for student profile. P7 said he thinks more moderate after the experience as most of other participants. P6 emphasized the importance of being focused on lifelong learning and in this context, online learning environments and tools are useful. He now thinks online learning is necessary and inevitable, and online learning systems should be continued. P2 says he has a very different point of view now. His thoughts are very different when compared to his thoughts at the beginning. He thinks this system is appropriate for current student profiles and needs because the students are mostly working and they have families, children, and other responsibilities. He sometimes meets with his colleagues from where he worked at previously, he observes that they think the way as he thought before this process. Now, he shares his new perspective with them and he tells them that their thought is not right, online learning and teaching is a need for our country, it is necessary and useful.

6. Conclusion

Use of online learning environments is increasing continuously. The opportunities that internet technologies provide and variety of multimedia tools trigger this. Faculty should have necessary knowledge and skills about online learning systems. Also, their points of view about distance and online teaching are important especially for early experiences. Transformative learning is about changing one’s perspective based on critical reflection and interpretation through experiences. In this study, findings revealed that participants experienced transformation to varying levels. They began with no knowledge and some negative bias, and after a 1-year experience their perspective was changed and they were in level of coming with new ideas for the improvement of system.
Experiences, applications, student profiles and participation, and benefits were the factors affecting their thoughts and perspectives. Doing further research will give more detailed information to provide evidences of transformative learning and its levels.

This study also contributed about online learning systems through its implications. Distance education field and online learning environments should be introduced to faculty members. Training and orientation should be more comprehensive. Technology competency and support should be continuous in the process. The faculty members should be involved in the decision process in order to lead to more accurate designs, tools and applications. Flexibility is essential in online learning systems. Both instructors and students should be provided with alternative tools and implementations to overcome problems and to meet the needs of different student profiles. Another issue is effective communication between different teams involved in online learning system. Competencies of staff in this system should complement each other.

References

