

10.5 Navigating the Demands in Distance Teaching: The Lived Experiences of Distance Teachers

Editorial

Case study upon case study in distance education examines, in minute detail, the effects of technology and its application in distance education. There are almost as many studies of the learners and the effects of distance on their educational experience. The "no significant difference" phenomenon is exhaustively documented in Tom Russell's book of the same name. However, studies looking at the impact of moving teachers from the classroom to a technologically-mediated instructional environment has received far less attention, the impact of which can be profound and disturbing, even to those faculty who consider distance delivery "a good thing" in principle but quail at the individual demands on their time, experience, and ingenuity.

In addition, few researchers actually talk to the subjects to uncover their feelings and insights. If you want to know all about a job, ask the person who is doing it.

Many years ago, when engaged in production line-work, I would see the time and motion experts come through the factory in their white coats with their clipboards under their arms. They would then stand, stopwatch in hand, watching one of us intently and making notes on their clipboards. They then would go back to their offices and redesign our processes and procedures. I always thought it strange that these experts never talked to us-never asked us about the jobs we spent our working hours performing. We certainly talked amongst ourselves and shared tips and tricks to make our demanding jobs easier and production faster.

This month's article fills both of these voids in the research by bringing a stance to the examination of the stories distance teachers tell to themselves and each other about their day-to-day experiences. Because the addition of technology to teaching raises the same kinds of teaching and learning issues, regardless of national and international location, the findings below are applicable across the board.

Teachers in distance settings are on the front lines and bear the full weight of radical changes and rapidly increasing student loads. Only when their experiences are fully understood can rational efforts be made to adequately prepare them and support them in their day-to-day tasks.

Mauri Collins Editor

Navigating the Demands in Distance Teaching: The Lived Experiences of Distance Teachers

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Abstract

Early studies of technology-based instruction have focused on the merits of the technologies

themselves in terms of cognitive gain and learning outcome. As distance education courses have become commonplace, recent studies have focused on the pedagogy of distance teaching and the experiences of students and teachers (Bromley and Apple 1998; Gibson 1996; Katz 1999; Thomerson and Smith 1996;). In this study, distance teachers describe ways in which the familiar landmarks of teaching were challenged and in which their thinking of what constitutes schooling, learning, and teaching were recast and transformed. Interviews were analyzed and common themes were identified using Heideggerian hermeneutics. One theme, "Navigating the demands in distance teaching," reflected "making the common practices of teaching visible" and "experiencing un-at-homeness" as common experiences among distance teachers. This study revealed that, as teachers navigate the demands in distance teaching, new pedagogies are created (Diekelmann, Schuster, and Nosek 1999).

Distance education is undertheorized; assumptions often are unexplored or assumed to be self-evident. Studies have begun to focus on the pedagogies of distance teaching, as suggested by recent publications on the instructional interaction of students and teachers (Katz 1999; Thomerson and Smith 1996; Wagner 1997); student attrition in distance education (Gibson 1996); and student and teacher expressions of academic confidence and doubt associated with their participation in distance education offerings (Bromley and Apple 1998; Egan and Gibb 1997; Gibson 1996; Nelson and Watt 1999). This interpretive phenomenological study describes common experiences of distance teachers in order to identify the common meanings and shared practices encountered as they navigate the demands in distance teaching.

Assumptions

The premise in conducting an interpretive phenomenological study utilizing teacher narratives is that teachers have invaluable, practical pedagogical insights to share with their peers. The work of Benner, Tanner, and Chesla supports that notion.

As Diekelmann (1992) is finding in her studies of teaching practices, narratives reveal human meanings and concerns, moral issues, and the practical know-how embedded in concrete teaching episodes. Edgerton (1993), Hutchings (1993a; 1993b), and others suggest that dialogue about particular teaching incidents may contribute a richer understanding of teaching and is, in fact a kind of scholarship of teaching (Boyer 1990). Teachers know much more than they can ever say about teaching. The precepts offered by any pedagogical theory inevitably fall short in prescribing teaching practices since the theory must be filled out, refined, or challenged by the particular teacher, with particular students and particular subject matter. This kind of practical pedagogical knowledge development can occur through discussion and interpretation of narrative accounts of particular teaching incidents (1996, 322). Teaching is a practice and, as such, it is learned through experience or, rather, by reflecting on experiences. Documenting the practices of distance teachers and describing the practical knowledge that they develop contributes to the recognition of how distance teachers teach and adds to the understanding of how to prepare teachers for distance education.

Methodology

Interpretive phenomenology, specifically Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology, was the background for this study. The work of the interpretive phenomenologist moves beyond traditional logical structures to reveal and explicate otherwise hidden relationships. Calling attention to human

practices and experiences, hermeneutics is closely related to critical social theory, feminism, and postmodernism. Unlike them, however, philosophical hermeneutics does not posit a political or psychological framework, nor does the interpretive phenomenologist attempt to posit, explain, or reconcile an underlying cause of a particular experience. Rather, the description of common experiences is intended to reveal, enhance, or extend understanding of the human situation as it is lived and to evoke thinking in the reader concerning the matter at hand.

Study Participants and Data Collection

Participants for this study were recruited widely from a major Midwestern research university through letters to departments and schools, a call for participants in campus papers, and announcements distributed at campus committee meetings. Thirty-one faculty and academic staff, three students, and two educational technologists who had participated in distance learning using technology from twenty-seven departments or schools were interviewed. Students and technicians were included to extend the understanding of the common experiences the teachers described. Informed consent was given to assure confidentiality. Nonstructured interviews conducted in person or by telephone were audiotaped and, subsequently, transcribed. All identifying information was deleted from the transcribed text and replaced with pseudonyms that were utilized throughout the data analysis and in this research report.

Participants were asked the following:

As you reflect on your experiences of teaching at a distance using instructional technologies within the last three years, please tell me about a time, one that stands out for you either because it reminds you of what it means to be a distance teacher-or it reflects an experience that is noteworthy because of its commonness. Include as much detail as possible and stay in the telling of your story, rather than stepping back and analyzing it or describing it from afar. After you have given the details of your story, please describe why this experience is important and what it means to you. It can be a story of breakdown when nothing went right or one of making a difference. If possible, please eliminate names and references to specific places.

The Hermeneutical Analysis

While the thinking that accompanies hermeneutical scholarship is reflective, reflexive, and circular in nature, describing the process of hermeneutical analyses may suggest a linearity and structure that belies the seamless, fluid nature of this approach to inquiry. Although a brief summary of the hermeneutical analysis utilized in this study is described here, adapted from Diekelmann and Ironside (1998), the reader is referred to several authors-Benner (1994), Diekelmann and Magnussen-Ironside (1998), Gadamer (1989)-who discuss hermeneutical methodology in more detail.

Each interview was read by team members to obtain a general understanding of the text. The team consisted of two experienced interpretive phenomenologists, seven master's or doctoral students, and two experienced teachers, one with and one without experience in distance teaching. Common themes were identified within each interview and each member of the team shared his or her written interpretations with the team. Dialogue among team members clarified the analyses. As the team analyzed subsequent interviews, each text was read against those that preceded it while comparing and contrasting themes. Thus, new themes were allowed to emerge, and previous themes were

continuously refined, expanded, or overcome. Team members clarified any discrepancies in interpretations by referring back to the interview text or by reinterviewing participants for clarification. Phenomena were not reduced to differences or similarities but, rather, team members explicated the practices of identifying the seemingly simple and overlooked.

Team members identified and explored themes that cut across interview texts. They reread and studied interpretations generated previously to see if similar or contradictory interpretations were present in various interviews. Although it is an underlying assumption of hermeneutical analysis that no single correct interpretation exists, the team's continuous examination of the whole and the parts of the texts with constant reference back to the participants ensured that interpretations were focused and reflected in the text. Whenever conflicts between interpretations of the interviews arose, team members provided extensive documentation to support their interpretations.

Reading across post-positivist, feminist, critical, and postmodern texts, team members held open and problematic the identification and interpretation of common practices. The purpose was to conduct critical scholarship using other interpretive approaches to extend, support, or overcome the themes identified using hermeneutics. In this way, analysis proceeded in cycles in which understanding, interpretation, and critique were in the center of the dialogues and discourses pursued. Like the hermeneutic circle, interpretations were considered complete but neverending.

The hermeneutical approach provided the opportunity for team members, and for researchers not on the team, to review the entire analysis for plausibility, coherence, and comprehensiveness. In addition, some participants in the study were asked to read interpretations of their interviews as well as the interviews of other participants to confirm, extend, or challenge the analysis. Others not included in the analysis, but likely to be readers of this study, reviewed the written interpretations. This review process exposed unsubstantiated and unwarranted interpretations. In the final research report, sufficient excerpts from the interviews were used to allow the reader to participate in the analysis. The purpose of this research report is to provide a wide range of explicated text so that the reader can recognize common practices and shared experiences.

Navigating the Demands in Distance Teaching: Making the Common Practices of Teaching Visible

Navigating the demands in distance teaching often meant that "you learn as you go along," as one teacher described it. A recurrent concern in the narratives generated by this study was that teachers generally have little preparation in education and "very little in the way of technology education." Teacher preparation and graduate education has already been identified as an issue in contemporary higher education (Tom 1997; Tabachnick and Zeichner 1991). In distance education, teacher preparation is even more problematic.

The process of learning "what it takes" for successful distance teaching sometimes involved selecting and purchasing the right technology for the course. At other times, it meant developing the course. Activities in distance teaching that previously had been the concern of the individual instructor suddenly involved new partnerships with media specialists and technicians. When a teacher who also helped others with course development was asked for a "list of essential ingredients to get this all to work," he described the following:

You have to have willing, knowledgeable content experts...and by knowledgeable, I don't only mean

in their content area. I mean [the teacher] has to be knowledgeable about what it's going to take to create this program. They...have to have a willingness to work with you....You also have to elicit their willingness to create as good a program as you intend for it to be. So come to some agreement ahead of time about quality, and you have to have again enough time to do it...It does take an understanding on the part of other people who are watching, or participating in a program as well. They have to realize that they're working with technology and that there are limitations of technology too. In my case, you have to have some good technicians available. That's very important....So the technical person is extremely important, not...only on one end...where the class is originating from, but also at each of the sites that are participating. You have to have a good technical person available there too, because if their audio doesn't work, if you can't hear the questions that they're asking, you lose the interactivity and the learning opportunity.

Knowledge, in the context of distance teaching, is not only content expertise, but also knowing what it takes to specialize in distance teaching: that is, knowing about the limitations of technology, the need to work with teams of technicians, and the importance of helping students, as coparticipants in distance courses, understand the limits of technology.

Changes in both the familiar ways and practices of teaching that accompany distance education, and also the "relentless" new roles and partnerships that attend the use of technology meant that even experienced teachers suddenly found some activities of teaching to be clearly taken for granted. They reported learning new ways to do the familiar. Teachers found themselves becoming beginners again and needing to gain new knowledge and learn new skills. One teacher described the experience as being "perpetually behind in everything" and "totally consumed in keeping up and keeping current."

Every teacher described the need to rethink the fundamental skills of engaging and connecting with students, preparing and presenting materials, and evaluating student performance. For many, there was a sense of being a beginner, not only with respect to the technologies, but also with the literature and scholarship of distance teaching.

You need to keep up on your own profession. You need to read your own journals....But you also now have to learn something new, a new technology, a new learning, and an entirely different field where I don't know the language. I don't know how the stuff works, so I find myself looking in journals that I've never looked in before; reading articles like I did when I was an undergraduate student in X, not understanding what I'm reading, but reading them just to learn the language and to understand what people are talking about....You're learning this whole new area. In the meantime you are continuing your own learning in your own area. So, it isn't like one or the other; you end up doing both, and that is very, very time-consuming. Very hard.

Having experienced the loss of the familiar and being faced with the unfamiliar, even experienced teachers often identified themselves as beginners.

This sense of beginning over argues for an understanding of distance education as a new specialty. Navigating this new specialty is also a commitment of time to "keeping up and keeping current" quite apart from the more visible time needed to adapt materials and changes in the timeliness of teaching. Implicit in this challenge is an acceptance on the part of the distance teacher to surrender the comfort of the familiar and to experience the discomfort of the unfamiliar.

Navigating the Demands in Distance Teaching: Experiencing Un-at-homeness

Distance teaching has summoned the teacher to pursue innovative ways of building academic community and learning partnerships. The common and familiar ways of teaching are challenged and recast. The following reflection of a distance education teacher underscores the confusing nature of technological teaching:

You sort of lose your identify about what it is [to be a teacher, and] every once in a while you go back and you think, I'm going to give this all up and just go back and do what I'm really comfortable with. You know. I can do the other stuff really well...Life's too short. I'm just going to go back and do what I'm doing, because when you're doing this other stuff, you're a little on edge all the time. And you're kind of like, is this working, or is this not working. And everybody's looking at you. I mean, I've had people in my classroom, constantly, in and out, because they heard of this program. They want to see how it works, and I don't have a clue who they are, you know. They're in and out, in and out. And so I think you sometimes are a little on edge thinking, oh somebody's going to think I'm a real fraud at this; you know, I don't know what I'm doing. And fifty percent of the time I think I know what I'm doing, but maybe I don't.

Through her dialogue, this teacher reveals that she is still learning what it is she has to learn, that she is self-conscious about it, and that she is struggling to judge how well she's doing. Although experienced enough to be able to step back and ask if it's working, she considers herself a beginner when her teaching is coupled with technology.

Another teacher shared a story that illustrated the sense of teaching as performing in this new setting.

What I've found fascinating is the guest speakers, who are all pretty expert in their field [and] who have never done this before, and they get really nervous....They come in as these experts and they have their style. Well, they get in front of an audiographics screen and they're jello! You know...HELP ME! We literally sit next to our guest speakers and help them. And they don't feel comfortable being alone.

A third teacher addressed the pervasive sensation of feeling unknowledgeable about distance teaching.

I'm very frustrated that I don't know enough. That is incredibly frustrating to me. I just sometimes think [that] there's some person [that] knows it all, and I, when am I ever going to know enough? That's where I'm at, and boy, I'll tell you it's very unsettling, real unsettling.

The "help me!" cry described repeatedly by distance teachers goes beyond unfamiliarity with the technology. Narratives relating the far-reaching, often unanticipated, effects associated with distance teaching establish a pattern of unfamiliarity that reflects new, emerging pedagogies. These challenge the concept of the teacher-as-expert prevalent in conventional pedagogy. One way new pedagogies develop is through challenging approaches and assumptions that are taken for granted and familiar. Challenging the familiar can be "unsettling," creating feelings of un-at-homeness.

New pedagogies create new relationships-new learning partnerships. Teacher and student isolation has been identified as an issue for concern in conventional pedagogies. Although the potential exists for distance education to foster disconnection, that is not what teachers described. Instead, "presencing" is

happening in distance classes despite, or perhaps because of, the new dynamics (i.e., the presence of absence) that are encountered when a different pedagogy emerges. The notion of distance education as community arises and challenges isolation. It may be that teachers and students reach out and make a different effort to connect when they are unable to rely on face-to-face contact in the classroom. Although the assumption that distance education is constitutively impersonal, anonymous, and disconnecting (Rose 1995) is widely held, one distance student challenged the concern about isolation in distance education.

By the middle of the course, I found myself saying this program is exactly right, the best ever. What happened was this teacher had all these ways of getting the group of us to know each other and work together. She would send all the papers to one person and then we had a telephone tree to alert everyone they had arrived and to pick them up. She got to know us so well that she would joke with you and say things like, "I bet Jesus Maria is rolling his eyes right now," and he would be! We would come early to class and go over our notes together and try to be better prepared than any of the other sites. Mostly, we got to know each other, and I suddenly realized how isolated I had been in the university campus program. I worked, so I drove in just in time for class, sat down, and often never got to know anyone in my classes....Isn't it weird? I am now more connected to my peers than I have ever been...and I really know this teacher....The teachers [in distance classes] don't seem to have so much power, and it's more a cooperative thing. They can't teach without us working the equipment on our end and really helping them out....School is supposed to prepare you for life, to live better, and when I was in the campus program, I thought that meant learning all the knowledge. Here in the distance program, we work together, like a human community....We are held together by those few university distance [education] teachers and their program.

In distance teaching as a pedagogical specialty, there is less of a hierarchical process in the teaching-learning experience. Both teachers and students facilitate schooling and teaching as learning. While the educational landscape, with its familiar landmarks and touchstones, has changed, new pedagogies continue to promote learning.

Distance Education as the Nursery for Creating New Pedagogies

This study suggests that distance education is a nursery for creating new pedagogies. The new pedagogies that are emerging are similar but not identical to conventional pedagogies. Heidegger (1957, 1962) describes sameness and makes a distinction between identical and the same.

The same is not the merely identical. In the merely identical, the difference disappears. In the same, the difference appears, and appears all the more pressingly....

As distance education teachers taught the same content in a similar way, the differences in their pedagogies emerged all the more pressingly.

The new pedagogies challenge the assumption that, in extending the campus to every student, teaching is simply extending what exists in the classroom. Distance teaching has summoned the distance education teacher to pursue innovative ways of building academic community and learning partnerships. Implicit in this challenge is an acceptance on the part of the distance teacher to surrender the comfort of the familiar and to experience the discomfort of the unfamiliar. The legacy of distance teaching and the willingness of teachers to navigate the demands in distance teaching is the generation

of new pedagogies for higher education.

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