Experiences of Online Instructors through Debriefs: A Multi-Case Study

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Abstract

This multi-case study describes the unique experiences of online instructors within a novel context of grant-funded online course design assistance at a large Midwestern University. Instructors reflect on their experience, from conception to implementation of their online courses, in debriefs conducted by the instructional designers. Such reflections can potentially help both, the instructors and the instructional designers, to better understand the design process leading to more effective online course designing and implementation experiences.

Context

The online learning unit housed within the Colleges of Engineering (COE) and Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) at a large land-grant research university awards grants to instructors to design and develop their asynchronous online and/or blended courses. Grant-recipient instructors, have the opportunity to collaborate with a highly skilled instructional designer (ID) throughout the design and development process, where in, the ID provides technical, pedagogical and instructional assistance. The online course design process follows an adapted ADDIE model in combination with Backward Design (Grant and Wiggins, 2005). At the conclusion of the design phase, and after the first implementation of the course, the IDs conduct debrief with the course instructor(s). Such debrief give the instructors the opportunity to reflect on their experience designing, developing, and implementing their asynchronous online/blended courses. This paper describes the findings of such debriefs and the insights into the experiences of the instructors.

Conceptual framework

Online learning has revolutionized educational practices with new paradigms, pedagogies, and technologies employed to design courses to enhance student learning. Online education provides institutions of higher education a low cost, flexible way to reach out to a global audience (Casey, 2008). With the advent and growth of online learning platforms in higher education, it becomes critical to understand the role of the online teacher in successful online courses and to design courses that enhance student learning. The foremost step in this direction is to understand and examine the experiences of online instructors as they design, develop and teach their online courses. The Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1996) can provide the conceptual framework in understanding such experiences. In Transformative Learning Theory, "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Furthermore, Transformative Learning Theory "involves transforming frames of reference through crucial reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it" (Mezirow, 1997, p.11). Dewey (1933) was the pioneer

in reflective thinking and recognized it as a specialized form of thinking. Dewey's ideas led to the development of Schon's (1983) 'reflective practice' and the identification and distinction of 'reflection-in-action' (during the experience) and 'reflection-on-action (after the experience) (Schon, 1988). Through critical reflection, instructors can critically examine their own teaching practices, personal beliefs, and the implications and assumptions about teaching and learning (Larrivee, 2000). Therefore, to understand the experiences of online instructors it is important to examine their critical reflections.

Research Design

This study followed a multiple-case study approach and examined the debriefs conducted with three different instructors. These debriefs were conducted by the IDs after the first iteration of their online course. These cases allowed for comparison of the experiences of instructors in designing and teaching their asynchronous online courses in different colleges within the university (Yin, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

The course instructors selected for the study were from COE and LAS. They were novice online instructors with no prior asynchronous online teaching experience. The selected courses were offered in the semesters of Fall 2015-Spring 2016. The invited instructors were informed of the goals of this study and were requested to provide with their written consent. This study followed all the requirements of the university's human subject protection office. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and maintain their anonymity. Table 1 provides the profile of the instructors interviewed.

Instructor	Age	Rank/College	Experience Teaching	Asynchronous online experience
Walter	40-50	Associate Professor/COE	20 years; Experience in lecture-capture distance learning.	0
Aron	50-60	Professor/COE	20 years; Experience in lecture-capture distance learning.	0
Marker	60-70	Professor/LAS	40+ years; Experience in lecture-capture distance learning.	0

Table 1: Profile of the instructors

Ethnographic style semi-structured debrief interview was conducted with each of these instructors, where the four stages of ethnographic interview protocol was followed, namely, Apprehension, Exploration, Cooperation and Participation (Spradley, 1979). As the instructors were reflecting on their experiences in designing and teaching their online courses, it was necessary not to impose any strict structure that would impede their thought process. At the same time, probing or follow-up questions were asked at stages where more clarification or detailed response was needed. These probing questions were asked mainly under four categories (1) instructor experience with designing, developing and teaching an asynchronous online course 2) strengths and weaknesses of the course (3) instructor experience working with an ID and (4) instructor's reflection on course improvements. Each of these interviews took place in the respective instructor's office and lasted about 45 minutes to an hour. The debrief interview was conducted by the ID not originally assigned to work with the instructor during the designing phase of the course to avoid any potential conflict or bias in the instructor's response.

The audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed individually by the three researchers involved in this study. Each researcher read a transcription in its entirety to develop a sense of the data. Subsequently, the research

team met to code one transcription together line by line. As they coded, they added key words and phrases that capture some initial ideas of the data.

Thereafter, the researchers met to discuss each of the analyzed transcripts. They discussed the preliminary codes and resolved any discrepancies. After all the three transcriptions were revised and open coded, a preliminary codebook was developed. The within-case analysis allowed the researchers to become more familiar with the cases. Using preliminary code book, the researchers coded the transcripts individually again and met in pairs to review those. Through a peer reviewing phase, the researchers reviewed each transcript and updated the codebook. Any disagreements were discussed and the researchers resolved them by discussing and reaching a consensus (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Adjustments were made, new themes were added, if needed, and a consensus was reached for a final code book. Using the final version of the code-book, each of the three transcripts were coded by each researcher for the last time and compared, the inter-rater reliability of more than 85% was established and the emerging themes were finalized.
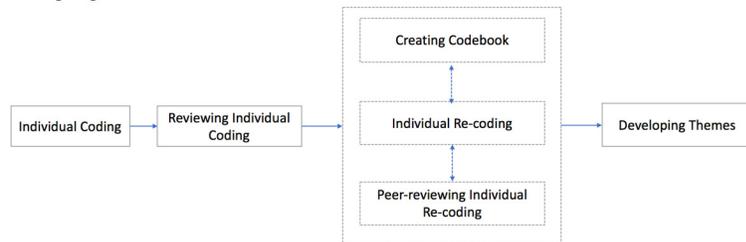

Figure 1. Cycle for Data Analysis

Findings

Each instructor had a unique journey and by cross-analyzing the ethnographic interviews some common categories emerged: (1) teaching philosophy (2) instructor's learning during design and development process (3) online experience during implementation of the course (4) instructor's perception of online learning benefits (5) instructor's challenges during course designing and during implementation phase (6) support from ID (7) course improvements (8) instructor's content development experience. The frequencies of each code occurring in the transcripts was also calculated. After considering the frequencies of each code and a through cross-examining of the categories across the cases along with relevant evidence from the transcripts, two main themes emerged (1) Evolution of Instructor's understanding an asynchronous online course: Content planning and Interactions (2) Working with an Instructional Designer.

(1) Evolution of Instructor's understanding of an asynchronous online course: Content planning and Interactions All instructors expressed that they had experience in teaching an online course. However, their understanding of an online course was restricted to the lecture capture format. In such a format, a live face-to-face class would be recorded and distributed to distance students, who either would log-in to the class synchronously or view the recorded materials at a later time. The Learning Management System (LMS) was used primarily used as a repository for lecture notes and for the delivery of recorded materials. All the three instructors, included in this study, had no prior experience in designing and teaching an online course. Their understanding of such a learning format evolved as they worked with an ID during the process of designing and teaching their online course. This evolution fell into two overarching areas of content planning and interactions which has been described in the following sections.

"This experience had a rather dramatic change in the way I teach my course"-Marker

Content Planning: All instructors acknowledged the initial time-investment in the content planning phase to develop their asynchronous online course. This phase included listing of their learning outcomes and objectives, modularizing the course, sequencing of content and creating content. They also acknowledged that the time invested in such content planning processes was far more than their previous face-to-face teaching experiences.

"It was general a good experience although it took longer time than expected for preparation and trying to perfect the lectures and so on"-Aaron

Furthermore, modularizing the whole course into logical modules, creating a detailed course schedule with precise due dates for all deliverables, and sequencing of the content were some of the firsts for these instructors. These came to the forefront in the debrief interviews.

"I think the other thing that I did differently this semester was the syllabus and the schedule document that you help me provide. It was a lot more detail than anything I'd ever had before. And I think that was very useful"-Aron

Asynchronous recording of lectures, planning and preparing for the same, and segmenting these into shorter video segments were not only challenging but presented the instructors with a new perspective at looking at the content and its planning.

"so I wasn't sure about the recordings, it took a while for me to figure out how to record the videos, edit videos, it was quite time consuming actually because it is a learning process for myself. I haven't done it before, initially was very time consuming, like it took me one day maybe even more to record just one lecture of maybe 60 minutes".-Marker

"I mean it took some time to think about how to partition the material, trying to have things in the segment that would hang together, and have segments that were roughly of the correct length" – Marker

"breaking the lecture into smaller parts. This was actually difficult for me to understand the students would like to see 15 minutes or 20 minutes maximum lecture."-Walter

Interactions: Understanding interactions between student-student and student-teacher, in an asynchronous online course, was a learning experience for the instructors. With their prior face-to-face experience, interactions mainly consisted of in-class questions by students. Any course updates would be verbally announced to the class by the instructor(s). Instructors relied on verbal and visual cues while delivering their lectures and accordingly paced the content covered in class or provided remedial lectures. However, in the asynchronous environment absence of such interactions made the instructors revisit their established teaching strategies.

"I'm in the classroom, I implore my students to ask questions anytime that they want. I tried to stop periodically to ask if there are questions, but of course, you can't do that in the asynchronous fashion."-Marker

"..how to pace the lecture, that part is different, in the in-classroom lectures, I could have interactions with the students and then I can adjust the pace adaptively, If I know that students are not getting it, then I can stop it and slow down, gave more hindsight"-Walter

Interactions were redefined according to the affordances of the LMS or the online meeting applications, such as Zoom. Instructors were initially apprehensive of the type and quality of interaction in the online format. Gradually, they appreciated the various channels by which interaction was facilitated in such courses. They also valued the frequency and quality of communication. This was a big leap of their evolved understanding of the online asynchronous format. Instructors, in their respective courses, had online office hours at scheduled times and days where students could come and interact synchronously with the instructor. Other LMS tool such as the Discussion forums, both graded and non-graded, was utilized to facilitate interaction. According to the instructors, such platforms promoted student-student engagement in their courses.

"The discussion forums in fact supplemented the completely asynchronous teaching mode by having students actually engage in the discussions and so on."-Aaron

"..for students to get them engaged, the online students for example, I think the discussion forums were actually very good rather than just talk to the computer, the students watching the videos and so on so engaging them in the discussion through the discussion forum, this was actually very helpful"-Aaron

Any critical information shared in the discussion forums or via emails was compiled by the instructors and shared with the class using Announcements. This process of communicating further evolved their understanding of

the asynchronous online platform which necessitated them to reflect on the course in an ongoing manner. This also helped them maintain a regular stream of communication with the students.

"Also, they interact among themselves online, and that's good because if one student has a question then others can help him or her."-Walter

"..my policy has always been to take the email questions provide an answer and then with very few exceptions strip off all the names and identifying information and send it to the entire class."-Marker

Analyzing the debrief transcripts also brought the working relation between the instructor and the ID to the forefront, the second major theme that emerged.

(2) Workflow with the Instructional Designer: The IDs working with the instructors in this study have more than three years of experience in designing asynchronous online courses. They worked with the instructors over period of 16-18 weeks consulting, assisting and advising at each step of the design process. Typically, the workflow included regular on-going meetings, discussions on course objectives and outcomes, content sequencing, assessment design and LMS page design. The IDs also work with the instructor during the implementation phase of the courses providing technical, instructional and pedagogical advising and assistance. All the three instructors in this study acknowledged the value that the IDs bring to the design process.

"I could not have put this course together and anything close to its form on without the help that I got because I was totally clueless and so you are very helpful and I appreciate the responsiveness and the accuracy of all things that I got from you during the semester"-Marker

Instructors expressed their appreciation for the guidance received in terms of content sequencing, i.e., length of each module, pacing the different assignments and type and format of assignments. They also acknowledged the guidance related to creating their syllabus, schedule and LMS page design which included course structure, layout and navigation.

"Also you proposed for different methods of assessment, specially, actually discussion forums, in fact, I think they played a pivotal role in getting the online students involved because without these discussion forums that you have suggested I think that the interaction with online students would have been to a much lesser degree"-Aron

The instructors appreciated the regular meetings, detailed minutes and reminders by the ID(s) to keep the project moving forward at a timely pace.

Also, follow up on the deadlines, also the email messages that you used to send us, actually this kind of, put some kind of pressure actually, not in a bad way pressure on us to pay more attention to record the lectures and put the material online. Otherwise, things may have dragged a little bit."-Aaron

"..the responsiveness is excellent and very helpful I never could have done this without the help that I got.."-Walter

The findings of this multi-case study reveal that conducting debrief help unveil instructors' inner thoughts, struggles, and approaches through a reflective practice. The challenges of content development, be it depth, time or technical, has come to the forefront of the design process. Interaction between students and between student and instructor was also a critical factor that shaped the experiences of these novice online instructors. Through the debrief interviews it became clearer that the instructors considered the design process far more front-load heavy than theory previous experiences. They also expressed that this experience reshaped many of their existing beliefs, teaching strategies and practices, and pedagogical assumptions in terms of student engagement, assessment design and course facilitation. The value that an ID brings to the entire design process also came to the forefront through the debriefs. Through debriefs, it has been possible to have a better understanding of the instructor's individual journey and their working relationship with the ID.

Conclusions

The debriefs not only shed light on the instructor's individual experiences but is also a step towards making the them a reflective practitioner. A reflective practioner is seen as a combination of self-awareness, reflection and critical thinking (Eby, 2001). Conducting debriefs can be a critical tool for the instructors to reflect on their design processes and teaching philosophies. It also serves as an insightful tool for IDs to improve their workflow. A better understanding of processes and philosophies, for both the instructor and the IDs, potentially can lead to more effective course design collaborative practices.

Future Study

This study can be extended to examine how such reflections enhance the design process and lead to better asynchronous online courses. Expanding debriefs with experienced asynchronous online instructors can unearth newer themes. This study could potentially be further extended to add to the ADDIE model to include debriefs as part of the instructional design process.

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