
7-15-2018

On(line) Being Relational: A Case Study

Carol Isaac

Mercer University, isaac_ca@mercer.edu

Arla Bernstein

Mercer University, bernstein_ag@mercer.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#), and the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Isaac, C., & Bernstein, A. (2018). On(line) Being Relational: A Case Study. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1617-1630. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3214>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

On(line) Being Relational: A Case Study

Abstract

This study describes a master's program cohort in the Southeast transitioning from a traditional to an online paradigm. This study examined through narrative analysis the online dialogue of engagement between students and faculty through the lens of social constructivism, specifically focusing on barriers creating monologue and facilitators creating "online" dialogue (Gergen, 1999). Transformative dialogue was more difficult in the online transition because of technology structures and differing expectations. Results suggest that faculty and students must be prepared to use online technology in a pedagogical setting that requires greater responsibility for students to "manage their education." The "boundedness" of an online environment requires faculty to encourage a shift from blame to responsibility. Although online dialogue was considered "stilted," even by experienced participants, the convenience is evident for students as well as faculty. The results demonstrated the need for faculty presence through the use of online tools to make the online environment meaningful. Reviewing these narratives may help administrators prepare for a transition to an online program.

Keywords

Online Instruction, Transformative Dialogue, Social Constructionism, Higher Education, Technology

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our appreciation to the Mercer University Center for Teaching and Learning for the grant that supported the research for this project.

On(line) Being Relational: A Case Study

Carol Isaac and Arla Bernstein
Mercer University, Macon, Georgia, USA

This study describes a master's program cohort in the Southeast transitioning from a traditional to an online paradigm. This study examined through narrative analysis the online dialogue of engagement between students and faculty through the lens of social constructivism, specifically focusing on barriers creating monologue and facilitators creating "online" dialogue (Gergen, 1999). Transformative dialogue was more difficult in the online transition because of technology structures and differing expectations. Results suggest that faculty and students must be prepared to use online technology in a pedagogical setting that requires greater responsibility for students to "manage their education." The "boundedness" of an online environment requires faculty to encourage a shift from blame to responsibility. Although online dialogue was considered "stilted," even by experienced participants, the convenience is evident for students as well as faculty. The results demonstrated the need for faculty presence through the use of online tools to make the online environment meaningful. Reviewing these narratives may help administrators prepare for a transition to an online program. Keywords: Online Instruction, Transformative Dialogue, Social Constructionism, Higher Education, Technology

Introduction

While higher education enrollments are growing at less than one percent overall, online enrollments are growing at a rate of ten percent (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2013). The prevalence of online enrollments in college courses has tripled in recent years (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Multiple indicators suggest that we are in the "golden age" of e-learning, and 37 percent of Americans agree or strongly agree that online higher education institutions offer high-quality education (Bidwell, 2014). Despite this steep growth, there are concerns ranging from a lack of discipline with student learners, low retention rates (Allen & Seaman, 2013), and inadequate educational experiences for e-learners (Eom & Arbaugh, 2011). Tinto (2007) has suggested that support, feedback and involvement are areas essential for student success and retention. Furthermore, online research has supported that feedback, self-motivation, interaction, and instructor knowledge and facilitation predict e-learning success (Eom & Arbaugh, 2011). Because of the increase of online programs, it is important to understand how support, involvement and feedback are contextually expressed.

This study describes a master's program in the southeast transitioning from a 36 to a 30-hour curriculum where online instruction became required. During this transition, there were two cohorts of students familiar with a traditional format who transitioned to an online format to "teach to complete." This study examined the online dialogue of engagement between these students and faculty through the lens of social constructivism (Gergen, 1999). Examining this transition may help administrators understand the major barriers and facilitators of initiating an online program.

Online Success

Students are more likely to be successful if the instructors provide detailed information in the syllabus about how to complete assignments, how grades will be determined, as well as course and communication expectations (Dietz-Uhler, Fisher, & Han, 2007). There should be clear and measurable learning objectives with detailed feedback regarding progress in course and assignments as well as constant engagement (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2007). Assignments for online courses should include both audio with voice inflection, and text-based content and feedback to engage a variety of learning styles (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2007; Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007).

Successful online students must find a work/life balance where their home environment supports their study skills as well as allows the integration of classroom knowledge into their current roles (Baxter, 2012; Boston & Ice, 2011). This is especially important for non-traditional students who are entering higher education in increasing numbers, especially in online programs (Wyatt, 2011). Non-traditional students will engage with supportive faculty, want to collaborate with other students, and want to be treated as adult learners (Ice et al., 2007; Wyatt, 2011). Students want faculty who are “flexible, adaptable to various teaching modalities, and willing to learn new teaching tools and learning management systems” (Shaw, Wu, Irwin, & Patrizi, 2016, p. 27). However, while most students are savvy with social media in this age of technology, often new students in an online environment have a limited understanding of online management systems and learning expectations which create barriers to success (Baxter, 2012).

Faculty as well as traditional students have needed programs to provide assistance and training in all areas of academic technology (Baxter, 2012; Ice et al., 2007; Wyatt, 2011). Survey and qualitative interview studies consistently have suggested that faculty perceive online teaching as far more labor-intensive than in the face-to-face classroom, frequently describing it as a new medium for instruction (Conciecao-Runlee, 2001; Lee & Busch, 2005). In a qualitative study, Concieção-Runlee’s (2001) participants described the “intense work involved in designing and delivering an online course because of the length of engagement before and during and the depth of engagement during course delivery” (p. 5). Although other studies have indicated that faculty have had positive experiences with online teaching (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009), how faculty perceive online instruction may affect students’ depth of engagement.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism seeks to understand how social actors reproduce social actions and their intersubjective understanding of circumstances (Schwandt, 2015). Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggested that through social constructionism, institutions socialize their members and that the conversation is the “vehicle for reality-maintenance” (p. 152). The self is therefore understood as a “product of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (Gergen, 1994, p. 49).

Gergen (2009) described the “bounded” being versus the “relational” being. The bounded being views the self as primary with relationships being secondary in importance. This “bounded” being is focused on social comparison and “engenders distrust of others” (Gergen, 2009, p. 15). In contrast, the “relational” self sees all mental discourse as originating from the “enlightened” mind to relationships (Gergen, 2009). As Vygotskii stated, “There is nothing in mind that is not first of all in society” (Vygotskii & Cole, 1978, p. 142).

Gergen (2009) suggested that teaching itself is a “relational performance” (p. 81). Teachers recognize their intention to teach, and also students identify this “discourse of

intention” to teach (p. 80). The differences of teachers and students’ experiences are “understood in terms of attention” (p. 83) or their contextual understanding of relational action. There needs to be better understanding of this contextual relational action in the online environment. Relational action is “communally riveted” (p. 86) becoming “social memory” (p. 87). Meaning for individuals as relational beings is constantly changing because of social interaction (Gergen, 1999). Certainly, there is evidence that this “relational performance” within the teaching persona in the online environment requires additional effort (Major, 2015).

Gergen (1999) supported a transformative dialogue that is based on negotiation, reflexivity and opportunities for communication among participants. This goal of transformational dialogue should be the fostering of new knowledge, the reshaping of participants’ identities, and the establishing of new relationships (Hayes & Koro-Ljungberg, 2011). The discourse of intention becomes the web of relations in which the participants become enmeshed (Gergen, 2009) and is related within “the flow of words between teacher and student, and between the students themselves, that meaning is constructed and knowledge discovered” (Major, 2015, pp. 189-190).

In opposition to dialogue is “monologue.” A “monologue” has been characterized by managing and supervising where monologic speakers legitimize themselves as experts and discourage consideration of alternative meanings (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). Monologues create barriers and hinder relational dialogue. The goal of educators should be to support a transformative dialogue with students where participants foster new understanding of scholarship to and encourage the shift from blame to responsibility (Gergen, 1999).

As appropriate to the framework of social constructionism, education has been considered a culturally situated social process. Faculty and students are constructed by the other as relational beings (Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Gergen, 1999). The relationship between faculty and students is created through interactions and dialogue each with unique experiences and histories that are fluid constructions of their relational histories (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Narratives of experiences encourage dialogue and transformation of relational beings. This study examined how dialogue was transformed for traditional students that transitioned to an online environment through the lens of social constructionism.

Methods

This qualitative case study took place at two sites within the Southeast within the same institution and department. IRB approval was obtained through Mercer University. Participants included three faculty and six students from two cohorts (2, 4) who were involved in an online initiative to “teach to complete” for a master’s program in the spring of 2016. All participants received and signed an informed consent. Selected faculty participants taught these students the only online courses they had during the program. All interviews and focus groups were completed in faculty offices then recorded and transcribed by the first author within two weeks after data collection. Each participant was given a pseudonym and all identifying information was removed.

To improve the validity in this study, several verification procedures were completed (Glesne, 1999). The analysis of the data was peer reviewed and debriefed with another faculty member. The interviews with faculty and student focus groups provided triangulation of data and provide thick description. Reflective memos were done after each interview and focus group and throughout the analytic process, providing an audit trail for an external reviewer from another department. It was important to have another faculty member (AB) outside of the department to help clarify the first author’s bias (CI) during data analysis as the first author (CI) was the coordinator for this master’s program.

This convenience sample included three faculty and six master's students that were currently finishing their degrees via this online/hybrid program (one international student elected not to participate). All three faculty members had been teaching at the university level for 5-30 years, but had varying experience with online teaching from 30 plus years (Dr. Hart), 10 plus years (Dr. King), to none (Dr. Mace). All students were between the ages of 24-30, two students were graduate assistants (GA) in athletics on one campus (Focus group 1: Hayes, Reardon) and the four others were working other jobs 20 to 50 hours per week on another campus (Focus group 2: Dane, Bella, Kari, and Macy). Only the GAs had their program funded by the university. All students wanted to work in higher education upon graduation.

Faculty interviews and student focus groups were asked the same questions about the online learning environment and how meaning is constructed (Table 1).

Table 1: Interview questions for students and faculty.

1. What is your background with online instruction? How do you perceive it?
2. How do you describe the M.Ed. program before this semester?
3. How would you describe the dialogue between faculty and students?
4. What were strengths and weaknesses of the online instruction? Barriers with technology?
5. How were your interactions made meaningful?
6. How can online instruction be made more meaningful?
7. What learning strategies did you personally find helpful when changing to this format?
8. How did you feel during the online courses?
9. How did you "know" the instructor (students) were there?
10. How would you describe the online dialogue that you experienced?
11. What does engagement look like to you?
12. Anything you would like to add?

Data Analysis

From a social constructionist perspective, the focus group interview provides a social context in which to investigate the production and negotiation of ideas, normative influences, commonalities, and difference (Finch & Lewis, 2003). In addition, focus groups are useful in studying group processes and constructed meaning (Frankland & Bloor, 1999; Frankland, Thomas, Robson, & Bloor, 2000; Morgan, 1988). Knowledge is co-constructed and differences are accepted or suppressed within the group process (Fairclough, 2005).

Narrative analysis is a methodology to analyze text data for elements of plot structure. Feldman and colleagues (2004) uses a four-level analysis. Once the text is identified as a story or description, the researcher will analyze the stories within three levels (Feldman, Sködborg, Brown, & Homer, 2004). Level one identifies the story line and summarizes how the interviews relate with the overarching narrative of the transition to distance education. Specifically, the stories of how different faculty introduced the online instruction to the students and students' reactions were documented and highlighted for analysis. Secondly, the researcher identified implicit and/or explicit oppositional language (categories) within the narrative specifically barriers and facilitators for online engagement/dialogue as well as narrative that concerned "Monologue," "Online Dialogue" and "Face-to-Face (F2F) dialogue" (Figure 1). Codes were organized into matrix categories of "Barriers to Engagement" and "Facilitators for Engagement

between “Faculty” versus “Students.” Thirdly, based on the identified story lines and oppositions, a systematic framework was created to allow the researcher to triangulate the stories of faculty and students for interpretation (Feldman et al., 2004). The interpretation was based on Bokeno and Gantts’ (2000) “Monologue” and Gergen’s (1999) “Dialogue” theoretical frameworks. Lastly, in order to sort stories among participants, initial codes were placed into categories and grouped into common themes (Feldman et al., 2004) where the oppositions are evidenced by Figure 1.

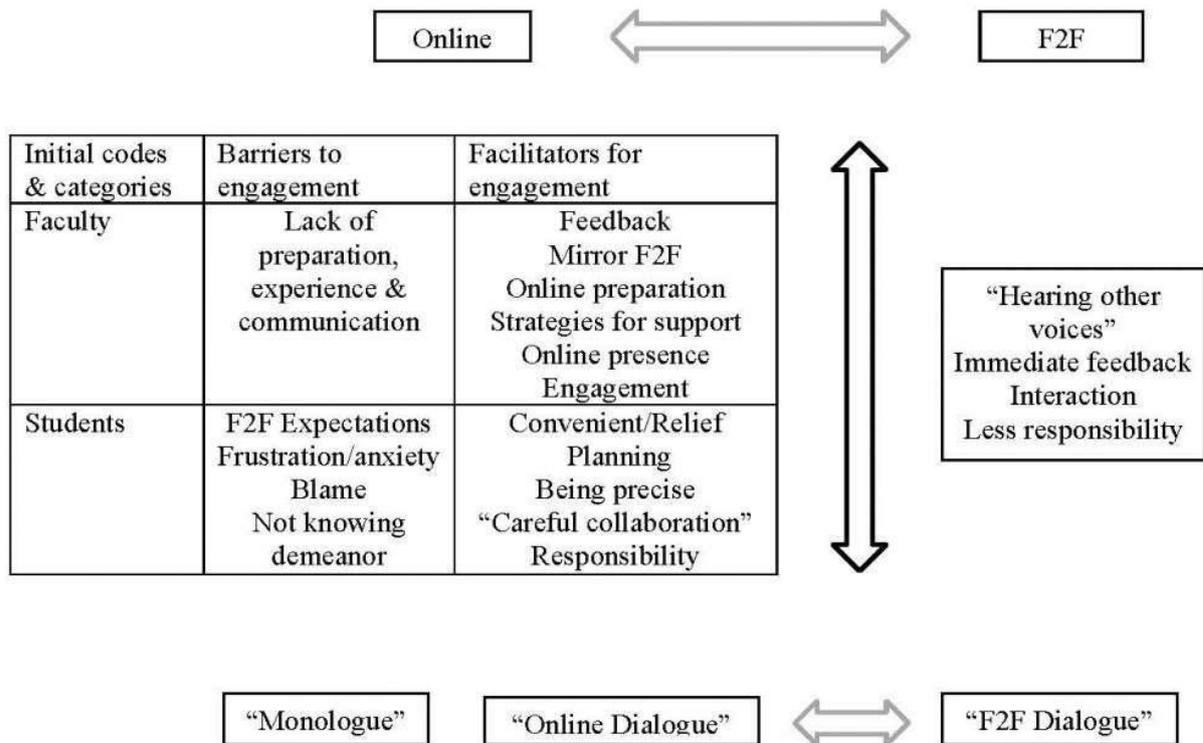


Figure 1. Illustration of the initial codes, categories and common themes.

Results

Results consisted of a narrative analysis of two focus groups that averaged 50 minutes and three interviews that averaged 39 minutes. The overarching narrative was the story of the transition from the face-to-face to the online format for each individual and focus group interviews. Then oppositional language of facilitators/barriers, monologue/dialogue. From students and faculty were synthesized into a systematic framework and initial codes/categories were grouped into common themes: “F2F (face-to-face) Dialogue,” “Online Monologue: The Bounded Being,” and “Online Dialogue.” Words in italics illustrate the initial codes (Figure 1).

The sequence of events for this narrative included a need to transition students from a traditional face-to-face program to an online program so students could complete their masters in spring, 2016. The advisor of the program (CI) made the decision the previous fall and “told” the students that they would have online classes the following semester as a vehicle to “teach to complete.” There had also been an institutional campaign to promote the implementation of distance education coursework that also initiated this action. Figure 1 highlights the codes, categories and themes for the results. Initial codes are in italics in the narrative.

F2F Dialogue

The theme, “F2F Dialogue,” described the interactive experiences of both students and faculty with traditional instruction. Both students and faculty members preferred face-to-face (F2F) instruction in the traditional classroom for the optimum learning environment. Even one GA who typically worked 80 hours a week said, “Being in class with your classmates and *hearing their voice* and tagging their voice with their opinion and being able to engage them in class; I liked it a lot- [there] was a lot of meat to that.” *Hearing other’s voices* and the ability to get *immediate feedback* was important to these students. When asked simply what “dialogue” looked like, the other GA stated:

What we're doing right now. Being given *interaction* and us comparing and being able to sense how the other person feels and being able to take their body language into context with what's going on with what we're saying so we can figure out how they mean what they say, if that makes sense. Very much what we're doing right now, being in a classroom with people, *interacting*. . . .

Although these students knew that the question pertained to “online” dialogue, they immediately identified dialogue with face-to-face *interaction* in a classroom. Dialogue was never directly considered to be online in any of the student responses.

Another reason why students liked the *interaction* is as Rearden, a GA, stated, “*Face-to-face*, you have people reminding you.” With more face-to-face *interaction* with faculty, all the students on both campuses liked when faculty “go on into detail and explain things, and if you have follow-up questions you can address them *immediately*.” However, with the ease of *communication*, Reardon, one of the GA’s, reported that faculty during F2F instruction: “Don’t give us a chance to mess up. (. . .) You almost take it like- you assume that we forgot everything, you lay it out for us, brick by brick.” Faculty typically took on more *responsibility* for reminding these graduate students of course deadlines and logistics. This *responsibility* was part of the F2F *expectations* of students that was missing in the online courses causing them *frustration*.

Online Monologue: The Bounded Being

In social constructionism, the participant views the self as a by-product of experiential contextual social forces. Bounded beings focus on social comparison, barriers and amplify distrust of others (Gergen, 2009). The theme “Online Monologue: The Bounded Being” represented how students and faculty described the barriers and negative attitudes about their online experiences.

The Group 2 students were very *frustrated* with their online transition and *blamed* the institution, although not the instructors. Being “told” that their last semester was going to be online resulted in *frustration* and *anxiety*. Dane was especially upset:

It was kind of a shock to hear that going into my last semester of my program that all of my classes are going to be moved online and I have no say in it; it’s happening, get used to it. (...) We've said it a hundred times the lack of *communication*; it was hard when you have a deadline and something happens, you're trying to meet that deadline, but you're relying on other people, including instructors, to help you get there and they don't respond.

Students recognized that there was an intention to teach but did not identify it as dialogue. Kari described one instructor as being good with asking questions “to make you talk to her but I didn't feel like it was a discussion.” Macy stated, “I can sum up my experience of what I've learned in these online classes; I felt that I taught myself.” They identified one faculty member who demonstrated a *lack of experience and preparation* in using the technology as Bella stated, “[the professor] would fix [learning platform] then it would be good for a couple of weeks and then (...) it would happen again.” Even with an experienced online faculty, students had difficulty with the university's learning management system.

Another barrier students perceived was, *not knowing the demeanor* of the faculty. Macy from Group 2 stated, “Sometimes you can tailor how you can communicate with your instructor and professor based on their personality.” Group 1 GA's reiterated that grasping instructors' *expectations* without meeting them *face-to-face* was, “like deciphering text messages from people. You *never know the demeanor* or the mood, in person you can sense it and feel it and they'll hear you.” Group 1 described getting online *feedback* from a less experienced faculty. Reardon reported, “It was hard. You're just looking at texts. This dude's destroying us.” Hayes echoed that the faculty member seemed, “Passive aggressive. Letting you know how he really felt but in a joking manner (...) after he was done ripping you apart.” Later when the students had this faculty member for the last F2F class, this same student reiterated the complexity, ““Oh my God, I'm going to fail this class. He hates me already;” then you meet him in person, he's awesome.”

Their *F2F expectations* created disconnect with their coursework and further *frustration* as one student even reported “feeling abandoned by [the] program.” Macy echoed the *frustration*, stating:

Dane and I worked on the paper, [and] talked about the topic pertaining to our paper. I would say that that was the only meaningful discussion that we had aside from the last class where we met [F2F with instructor].

Here they described an inexperienced online instructor who met F2F for the last class and attempted to condense the course into one session. All interactions with faculty were compared to their F2F experiences. When asked directly how an experienced online instructor made “interactions meaningful,” one student replied, “There wasn't really any magic,” and her classmate seconded, “[The faculty] responded to her.” Dane from Group 2 stated:

It was much easier to *communicate* having *F2F* conversations in which they will go on into detail and explain things and if you have follow-up questions you can address them *immediately* (...) but when in an e-mail format or any other format, (...) you don't get the answer to your question and you don't have the opportunity to follow up until days later.

This narrative summarized the contrast of students' perceptions between *F2F* with online teaching. At least for the Group 2 students not on assistantships, the financial impact was part of their *frustration*. Macy explained their *frustration* with finances, “it was disappointing quality of education we received on these online classes for what we paid for them.”

Students and faculty had similar descriptions of their experiences with online dialogue. Students described online dialogue as “limited,” “insubstantial,” and “hasty.” Both GA's agreed. Reardon stated:

Some people would write and write and write and it would be great. Other people would be one or two sentences and you got people adding, “it's was

good," again, it's just text. We got to read and read (...) (Hayes) and read (laughter).

These GA's described online dialogue in terms of "again, it's just text," yet not "great" or even "good." Although two of the faculty described online dialogue as "great," and "really good;" the third with over 30 years of online experience reflected that online dialogue is:

Stilted, (pause) because I think when they have to ... [Students] tend to be a little more open [F2F]. We've gotten into some pretty heavy discussions in class. Discussions about race, discussions about violence in the classroom, how do you deal with it? I think because they had to write it, they shy away from it. They would write what exactly I asked for.... Even with the burgeoning influence of social media, online dialogue requires "accountability" with "consequences," "Because it's part of their grade, and on Facebook, no one's judging them."

Even the faculty remarked that students did the minimal posts; "They count- 'I've got to post three times.'" These kind of descriptions resulted in students' online experiences being coded as "monologue." This ranged from students being "told" that their last semester was online to additional barriers they perceived with online instruction.

Online Dialogue

While "Online Dialogue" was often masked or even placed in opposition by the "Online Monologue," faculty and students both operationalized what "Online Dialogue" looked like contextually. While there were obvious barriers compared to "F2F Dialogue," there were experiences to facilitate engagement in the online environment.

Facilitators for engagement. The category of "Facilitators for Engagement" was illustrated by the codes offering *feedback*, *mirroring F2F*, having *online preparation*, creating *strategies for support* and having an *online presence*. As indicated above, faculty had varied responses to their online experiences, but most were predominately positive. Although students reported "waiting days" for a response, faculty typically reported that they provided *feedback* via e-mails within 24 to 48 hours. One seasoned online faculty stated:

Every student got a comment back. "That was great the way you brought in this textbook." "I'm sure that helped your other students." "That was a good explanation of this concept." I would email the response back to the students. I made sure I kept the list of that, so make sure that every student got two of those *feedback* [responses], plus I would ask questions two or three times a week. (...) The *interactions*, like I said, I tried to email every student twice. I tried to respond to every discussion twice, *feedback* twice to each student, and I always used their names in the *feedback* on their papers.

Feedback was a part of *mirroring* the F2F experience and was highlighted by experienced faculty. Dr. Hart explained mirroring:

How do I perceive it? It's just like F2F instruction. The instructor has to develop the course, or the course has to be developed in such a way that it *mirrors* exactly the same content and the same experience that a F2F class gets.

Experienced faculty even reported that they felt similar experiences that *mirrored* online with traditional teaching. Dr. King stated:

I think there are times when to me when I perceive that a student is being stretched and is learning and gaining, that's as great a joy to me as there is in my professional life. When those moments come through, I feel great. When I feel like I've got a student who's just kind of mailing it in, I feel a little disenchanted, but I would say overall with online I feel the former more than the latter at about the same or even more than F2F.

This inexperienced online faculty provided *feedback* but also described his difficulty with online *mirroring*: this faculty's perception was that he could not teach his content online:

Two-fold, number one; the students appreciated the *feedback* I gave on their written assignments (...). The second when we actually met *F2F* in that one class period I did the best I could to breathe and everything I would generally have eight weeks to do right.

For this faculty member "to do right" was to teach *F2F* which indicated a *lack of preparation* and *experience* that students had described. Although students perceived that faculty members were not prepared, seasoned online faculty described hours of *online preparation* "to mirror the same experience [as *F2F* courses]." This inconsistency between perceptions is relevant to the "monologue" with their online experience.

One seasoned online faculty puts links to the syllabus and other content in at least two places as *strategies for support* for students because students often receive and discuss a syllabus the first day of a *F2F* course. Other faculty exemplars of *support* to facilitate students' online experiences included having a "virtual café" where students can talk to each other and share things without the professor directly lurking or reviewing their comments. Other evidence of *support* included a "discussion post called, 'Questions for the Professor,' (...). I'll even put it in the video, 'Somebody asked about this. This is the answer.'" Other types of faculty *support* were "to have the faculty member appear in the discussions." Dr. Hart explained, "Latest research in 2016 said that students want to see the professor more *present*; I try to be more *present* in this [class], where not just drop one comment per week."

Dr. Hart understood that "Students want instant gratification; they want to know right now." Their *support* in the form of *feedback* contributed to the *online presence*. She reiterated, "It's that sense of *presence*, that there is a person here. (...) I think that's what makes the online meaningful." The other seasoned online faculty made interactions more meaningful by using the discussion tool asking questions, "Can you help me understand a little more what you're saying? What about, for instance, say 'A' happened?" and "Socratic-based in my discussion, I love the discussion forums." "Dropping in" supported how this faculty member created *online presence* for students. This professor also was careful with *feedback* to avoid students feeling "ripped apart." He explained, "You have to be a little more sparing or a little more overt in using humor online than you do *F2F*." Dr. Hart summarized online *engagement*:

They're interacting with the content. They're interacting with their peers. They're interacting with the instructor guide. I don't like to say "professor," because I'm not the professor in an online class. The only way you can evaluate *engagement* in an online class is access. "How many times are they doing it?" (...). "Are they connected? What tools connect them?" It is the discussion tool.

So for these faculty, *mirroring F2F, support, presence, feedback, and preparation* were all a part of “Online Dialogue.”

Student online dialogue. Despite students’ disappointment with *F2F expectations, frustration/anxiety, not knowing demeanor*, and difficulties with faculty’s *lack of preparation and experience and communication*, students affirmed positive experiences. The positive initial codes included: *convenient/relief, planning, being precise, careful collaboration and responsibility*. While these students preferred “F2F Dialogue,” they learned strategies for success.

The first overwhelming response was that their online experience was *convenient* and with that came *relief* around time especially for the GAs. Reardon stated, “You can go along and bang on your work really quick,” and Hays echoed that “Road trips coming back on the bus, perfect time to do the discussions.” These students had difficulty balancing their work in athletics with their academics, as Hays stated, “Okay, do I miss [work] or do you go to class (...) you got to do something, you can’t be in class for five hours, two nights a week; there’s a game and practice guaranteed.” Faculty in the past had difficulty with these cohorts of GAs because of frequent absences.

The online environment allowed students to not have to make a choice where they had to be, but necessitated a degree of *planning* and *responsibility* to which they were not accustomed. When the assignments closed, Rearden, one of the GAs, lamented, “You can’t get those points back and, ‘Oh my goodness, my grade is!’” Hays related:

"What's due? I got to check, I got to check. Got to make sure. Always writing down." Knowing that I don't have to at least go to class, I can be where my I'm supposed to be, as far as where my boss needs me and all that, that was definitely huge. (...) You just have to *plan* it out, you have to space out, soak on it before you just go back and answer stuff.

While there was some evidence of students being “hasty” and “banging [work] out real quick,” Rearden stated:

Whatever you say, you're going to have to make it count, if that makes sense. You can't be too vague or too broad. Whatever you're saying- it has to be *precise* and on point. (...). [If] you write like you talk, somebody's going to be, "What is this. I don't even understand what they're saying."

These students did things “quick” but could not only do the minimal online; they had to “soak it up” to *be precise*.

Focus group 2 participants did not seem to have the time pressures of the GAs in Group 1 although Kari mentioned that being online was “*convenient*.” Group 2 described their online engagement, especially the discussions, as being “hasty,” and “everybody did it at the last minute.” These students had to *plan* differently. One student complained about a *collaborative* paper saying, “We wrote the paper in two different directions because we are different people; we had to physically meet to talk about specific details because it was too hard to explain the little details and work those out.” While Group 2 did not talk about working on bus trips like the Group 1 GAs, they still had *plan* their time when working *collaboratively*.

When asked specifically what strategies students used to make their experience more meaningful, Bella reported, “Basically, we worked among ourselves.” Specifically, Dane stated that, “We had to *carefully collaborate*. (...) In certain cases when we didn’t know the answer or a specific question on a quiz, ‘Hey if anyone else can find this let me know.’” Bella explained that in the beginning if there were two chances on the quiz, “I would make a list and

cross off and then I would look to see what the answer is, 'no I think it's this one,' and so it's a process of elimination (laughter)." Although for some faculty, this may constitute inappropriate behavior (Borup, 2016), this strategy made students *carefully collaborate*. The students even successfully worked together to convince faculty to change course expectations, as Dane stated, "I can show you the body of the emails we sent back and forth with him to convince him to [allow us to collaborate]."

Through initiating *collaboration*, the students learned *responsibility*. Rearden stated, "As long as you stay on top of the work that's assigned and you have enough "kiss drive" [flattery] for lack of better terms, and you can be *responsible* enough to check on the work."

Macy stated, "I didn't email [experienced faculty] as much as I emailed [less experienced faculty], (laughter) because her stuff [technology] worked." Students had to be more responsible and take more initiative especially with inexperienced faculty. Dane stated:

I think by being the Devil's Advocate, the whole conversation is that you get out what you put in. But I would agree that saying regardless, regardless whether you're online or in a classroom, you're not going to get a high-quality education unless you try and get that education.

Accountability and consequence made a difference in their *responsibility* for engagement.

Dr. Hart highlighted the difficulty students have in, "Making that transition from undergraduate to graduate, that is difficult, from, 'Feed me, feed me, feed me,' to, 'I'm an independent scholar now.'" Dr. Hart emphasized the transition to being *responsible* for their graduate education and that this "Is much harder in the online environment." These students were in their early to mid-twenties; their undergraduate experiences were varied in the academic rigor and only two out of the six students had had any experience with online learning. However, this experienced faculty member knew that transformative dialogue can occur for online students although suggested that it is "different." Dr. Hart's final comment illustrated the final *responsibility* is on the student; "They're managing their own experiences, which is fortunate."

Discussion

Gergen (1999) highlights the role of transformative dialogue that is based on negotiation, reflexivity, and opportunity for communication among participants. Narrative analysis of their stories of experiences illustrated the dialogue and transformation as relational beings. As consistent with Feldman and colleagues (2004), the story line was identified and summarized, specifically, how faculty introduced online instruction and students' reactions were documented. Then the researcher identified implicit and/or explicit oppositional language within the narrative, such as "Barriers" and "Facilitators" for "Monologue" and "Online Dialogue" in comparison to "F2F Dialogue" (Figure 1). Lastly, in order to sort stories among participants, initial codes were placed into categories and grouped into common themes (Feldman et al., 2004). An interpretive systematic framework of themes was created based on the identified story lines and oppositions: "F2F (face-to-face) Dialogue," "Online Monologue: The Bounded Being," and "Online Dialogue"

Educators support a transformative dialogue where students foster new understanding of scholarship and encourage a shift from blame to responsibility (Gergen, 1999). Inherently, dialogue was perceived as face-to-face interaction for students and even faculty. Dialogue was never directly categorized to be online instruction in any of the student interviews, including discussion boards. Students recognized the intention to teach discourse with online instruction, but did not identify it as dialogue. For traditional instruction, faculty take on the responsibility

for reminding these graduate students of course deadlines and logistics. This role was part of the traditional expectations of these students, without which frustrated them.

The online “boundedness” created barriers and amplified distrust (Gergen, 2009). Barriers were many during the online transition and included: “Lack of Preparation, Experience and Communication” for faculty as well as students having “F2F Expectations,” Frustration/anxiety,” and “Not Knowing Demeanor” of faculty. Students also “Blamed” the institution (not individual faculty). Being “told” that their last semester was going to be online increased frustration and anxiety because of a lack of communication. This inconsistency between perceptions is relevant to the “monologue” with their online experience. The students were not academically trained for online instruction which is critical for their success (Boston & Ice, 2011; Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). However, these students did not have the choice if they wanted to graduate.

This “boundedness” of monologue is in contrast to transformative dialogue (Gergen, 2009). Monologue even created the sense of abandonment for one student. Not knowing the demeanor of faculty was a barrier for students especially with inexperienced faculty who did not use or learn online strategies, and “to do right” was to teach face-to-face. The reluctance of some faculty to teach online has been well documented in the literature (Major, 2015). The seasoned faculty in this study knew online teaching was more labor-intensive than the traditional classroom, yet took time to prepare (Conciecao-Runlee, 2001; Lee & Busch, 2005); however, they indicated having positive experiences (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009) knowing to anticipate providing online demeanor and presence.

Meaningful interactions required responsiveness and constant engagement by faculty (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2007). Feedback was a part of mirroring the face-to-face experience by experienced faculty and was used to engage a variety of learning styles (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2007; Ice et al., 2007). For faculty, student online engagement was the discussion tool. Their support in the form of feedback contributed to the online presence- that sense of presence made online instruction meaningful. However, even the faculty member with the most experience reflected that online dialogue was “stilted,” in spite of attempts to mirror traditional teaching.

Students liked the convenience, but online instruction necessitated planning and careful collaboration, an increase in responsibility. This is consistent with the research that students are more successful when curriculum balances between challenge and flexibility (Boston & Ice, 2011; Boston et al., 2011). Accountability and consequence made a difference in their engagement. Although for some faculty, careful collaboration may seem to be inappropriate behavior (Borup, 2016), this strategy created the necessity for students to work together, thus creating meaningful engagement. Through this the students learned responsibility, even more than face-to-face instruction.

Implications from this research suggest that training must be given to students transitioning from a traditional paradigm to an online paradigm. Faculty and student narratives through the lens of social constructivism, specifically focused on barriers creating monologue and facilitators creating “online” dialogue (Gergen, 1999). Transformative dialogue was more difficult in the online transition because of technology structures and differing expectations. Results suggest that faculty and students must be prepared to use online technology in a pedagogical setting that requires greater responsibility for students to “manage their education.” The “boundedness” of an online environment requires faculty to encourage a shift from blame and distrust to responsibility (Gergen, 2009). Although online dialogue was considered “stilted,” even by experienced participants, the convenience and relief is evident for students as well as faculty.

The results demonstrated the need for faculty presence through the use of online tools to make the online environment meaningful. Synchronous tools, such as web conferencing, can enhance both teacher presence and dialogic responsiveness. However, faculty must encourage

students to prepare themselves to use online technology in a pedagogical setting. Particular care may be needed for non-traditional students that are not technologically savvy. Further research should include examining a cohort of students that were trained in online instruction. Reviewing these narratives may help administrators prepare for a transition to an online program.

References

- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2011). *Going the distance: Online education in the United States*. Newburyport, MA: Sloan Consortium.
- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2013). *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the United States*. Newburyport, MA: Sloan Consortium.
- Baxter, J. (2012). Who am I and what keeps me going? Profiling the distance learning student in higher education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(4), 107-129.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Bidwell, A. (2014). Gallup: Online education could be at a tipping point. *US News & World Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2014/04/08/americans-trust-in-online-education-grows-for-third-consecutive-year>
- Bokeno, R. M., & Gantt, V. W. (2000). Dialogic mentoring. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14(2), 237.
- Bolliger, D. U., & Wasilik, O. (2009). Factors influencing faculty satisfaction with online teaching and learning in higher education. *Distance Education*, 30(1), 103-116. doi: 10.1080/01587910902845949
- Borup, J. (2016). Teacher perceptions of learner-learner engagement at a cyber high school. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 17(3), 231-250.
- Boston, W. E., & Ice, P. (2011). Assessing retention in online learning: An administrative perspective. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 14(2), 1.
- Boston, W. E., Ice, P., & Gibson, A. M. (2011). Comprehensive assessment of student retention in online learning environments. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 14(1), 1.
- Conciecao-Runlee, S. (2001). *A phenomenological study of college faculty experiences derived from teaching in a computer-mediated environment when there is an absence of physical presence*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference, Lansing, MI.
- Dietz-Uhler, B., Fisher, A., & Han, A. (2007). Designing online courses to promote student retention. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 36(1), 105-112. doi: 10.2190/ET.36.1.g
- Eom, S. B., & Arbaugh, J. B. (2011). *Student satisfaction and learning outcomes in e-learning: An introduction to empirical research*. Fairclough, N. (2005). *Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Feldman, M. S., Sködborg, K., Brown, R. N., & Homer, D. (2004). Making sense of stories: A rhetorical approach to narrative analysis. *Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory*, 14(2), 147-170. doi: 10.1093/jopart/muh010
- Finch, H., & Lewis, J. (2003). Focus groups. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 170-198). London, UK: Sage.
- Frankland, J., & Bloor, M. (1999). Some issues arising in the systematic analysis of focus group

- materials. In R. S. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Developing focus group research: Politics, theory and practice*. (pp. 144-155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Frankland, J., Thomas, M., Robson, K., & Bloor, M. (2000). *Focus groups in social research: Introducing qualitative methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J. (1999). *An invitation to social construction*. London, UK: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.
- Hayes, S., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2011). Dialogic exchanges and the negotiation of differences: Female graduate students' experiences of obstacles related to academic mentoring. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(3), 682-710. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss3/4>
- Ice, P., Curtis, R., Phillips, P., & Wells, J. (2007). Using asynchronous audio feedback to enhance teaching presence and students' sense of community. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 11(2), 3-25.
- Lee, J. A., & Busch, P. E. (2005). Factors related to instructors' willingness to participate in distance education. *Journal of Educational Research*, 99(2), 109-115. doi: 10.3200/joer.99.2.109-115.
- Major, C. H. (2015). *Teaching online: A guide to theory, research, and practice*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- McNamee, S., & Gergen, K. J. (1999). *Relational responsibility: Resources for sustainable dialogue*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Shaw, C. S., Wu, X., Irwin, K. C., & Patrizi, L. A. (2016). Faculty personality: A factor of student retention. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 19(1), 1-13.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2015). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vygotskii, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult student success and retention. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 10-20. doi: 10.1080/07377363.2011.544977

Author Note

Carol Isaac is an Assistant Professor of Research in the Department of Educational Leadership at Mercer University-Atlanta. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: isaac_ca@mercer.edu.

Arla Bernstein is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Communication in Penfield College at Mercer University-Atlanta. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: bernstein_ag@mercer.edu.

We wish to express our appreciation to the Mercer University Center for Teaching and Learning for the grant that supported the research for this project.

Copyright 2018: Carol Isaac, Arla Bernstein, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Isaac, C., & Bernstein, A. (2018). On(line) being relational: A case study. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1617-1630. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss7/9>
