

Faculty Experiences with Emergency Transition to Online Teaching amid COVID-19 Pandemic in a Health Science University

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to describe experiences of university teachers who transitioned from in-campus to online teaching during COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: The study had a qualitative descriptive design. In-depth face to face interviews were conducted following informed consent. Sample comprised of eleven faculty members engaged in online teaching, recruited through purposive sampling in a Health Science University in Saudi Arabia. Content analysis of the data was done by employing Graneheimian inductive approach. Academic rigor was established using standard principles of trustworthiness.

Results: Two main themes emerged as 'embracing the process' and 'identifying gaps'. Two subthemes were within each theme, populated by 12-36 statements.

Conclusion: Faculty members described thoughts and behaviors that shaped their experiences. Student response to online teaching affected preconceived notions. The need to acquire skills and knowledge regarding online pedagogy and technology was indicated.

Keywords: Online Teaching; COVID-19; University; Faculty; Experiences

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Introduction

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus) has affected millions of lives across the globe. All societal components are impacted and several institutions including the educational sector are disrupted. Drastic changes occurred in the field of health science education. In attempts to continue professional education amid the global emergency, faculty members across the globe transitioned to online formats and virtual education [1]. Streamed online lectures replaced large group in-person sessions whereas; interactive webinars substituted small group teaching and tutorials. In many cases, clinical clerkship and hospital rotations for students and interns are also suspended [2].

In the rush to quickly shift to online education, institutional agility was brought to test. Many higher educational institutes dealt with a

huge challenge to prepare their faculty members for online teaching in a short time frame. Instructors, new to virtual education were baffled by the tasks to actively engage and motivate students. Challenges are attributed to novel technology, poor bandwidth internet connections and varying quality of educational video and images [3]. In some cases, organizations merely generated online learning content rather than focusing on online pedagogy. Meanwhile, the need to support students digitally, without compromising on standards of quality education, is sensed across the globe [4].

In the ongoing crisis ridden by fear and uncertainty, both the students and the instructors undergo struggles to adapt to the new requirements for distance education. Academic faculty members are battling conditions that affect productivity, clarity of thoughts and quality of work [5]. Several personal and organizational factors contribute to their unique experiences. It is important to take note of



faculty experiences in context of the current restricted and captivating global scenario, for effective decision making related to educational policies and curriculum reforms. This study aims to offer an insight into the actually experiences of the faculty members in a health science university in Saudi Arabia who underwent a swift transition to online teaching with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

The qualitative descriptive study was conducted after IRB approval received from the Research office at King Abdullah International Medical Research Center (IRBC/0712/20). Study participants comprised of faculty members in colleges of medicine and nursing. They were recruited by convenient purposive sampling. A semi structured questionnaire guided in-depth face to face interview, which lasted 40-50 minutes. Interviews were conducted at venues selected by the interviewees, following informed consent. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Identities of the study participants were concealed by using pseudonyms for data reporting. Thematic saturation was attained after eleven interviews. Member checking ensued with the participants. Investigators maintained reflexive journal for bracketing. For accuracy of the transcribed data, it was carefully matched with the audio recording. Content analysis was done employing the inductive approach proposed by Graneheim UH, et al. (2004) [6]. The data was manually analyzed in four steps. Initial coding was done by first author following analysis by co-authors. In the first step (body of text), specifically evident experiences of the study participants, particularly in context of emergency transition to online teaching amid COVID-19 pandemic were thoroughly detected by multiple reading of the transcripts. In the second step (meaning unit), significant, similar and alike statements (words, clauses, phrases and sentences) were highlighted and selected. In the third step on data analysis, categorization and summarization of the significant statements occurred (condensed meaning unit). In the fourth and final step (coded units), the summarized content was conceptualized to yield themes and subthemes. Trustworthiness and rigor were achieved by observing standards of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability by Lincoln YS, et al. (1985) [7]. For credibility, content underlying each one of the two themes was cross checked and compared with the participant’s feedback of the interviewees. To ensure dependability, meaning and relevancy were pursued by a process of keen inspections and discussions among investigators along with two experts on qualitative study design. This continued until a joint agreement was reached on conclusion. To establish transferability, a rich, in-depth description was provided. Confirmability was achieved by an audit trail conducted on the exploratory process and initial raw data.

Results

All study participants were full time faculty members with mean age 47±8.1 years. There were four male and seven female participants whereas, five of them were Arabic speakers. Study sample comprised of one associate professor, eight assistant professors and two lecturers. Their on-campus face to face teaching experience was between five to thirteen years.

Data analysis yielded two themes namely ‘*embracing the process*’ and ‘*Identifying gaps*’. Each theme comprised of two sub-themes (Table 1). The subtheme was populated by 12-36 statements.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Embracing the process	The comprehension
	The reactions
Identifying gaps	Weak learning environment
	Ruffled roles

Embracing the Process

The first theme was ‘embracing the process’ with two subthemes, ‘the comprehension’ and ‘the reactions’. The study participants described their personal experiences whilst adapting to online teaching which gave them several moments to bridge their thoughts, formulate opinions and respond to the conduct of the peers, students and administration.

The Comprehension

Faculty members described that several realizations dawned upon them while accepting their newly formed roles for online teaching that affected their approach and conduct.

‘I am not very tech savvy; I use gadgets only in need. They admired my face to face classroom skills so I felt a sudden sense of loss. I noticed that my students were ready for online classes; all of them were ok with it. I had to deal with my fear of technology and it works, even for an old soul like me’ (Mike).

‘I never thought that one day I will teach purely online. There are many things that I learned and practiced and few of them I would like to keep doing even when things get back to normal’(Ana).

‘After online teaching in lockdown, I have become a different kind of teacher...it is irreversible, I have a sudden interest in the online tools of Blackboard [e-learning system] that I never paid any attention to before’ (Judy).

‘I had my doubts when my peers spoke of flipped classrooms and blended learning and one day I woke up to the lockdown. My faith on online teaching has grown as I see how it works. I want to learn more about effective online teaching; if I want to be good at work’(Kim).

‘Some students never really participated in my [face to face] class and I tried to grab their attention by occasionally throwing questions at them...but in online class most of those who never interacted, chose to interact a lot, they would speak or text on online chat during class and I said, wow! They are just different; they are more interactive online than face to face!’ (Sam).

‘I discovered that many students are more at ease with online interactions. Some like to talk and they would do that, others prefer to write comments on live chat and I saw this pattern in the whole course’(Farah).

‘I have better clarity now, I mean, there were many unnecessary hassles that occupied my whole day at work and did not really contribute much to the quality of my teaching. Without all that, I am more connected to my primary role as teacher’(Soha).

‘we were busy in doing god knows what all day, I have more time at hand now, with the travelling time gone, exhaustion from a long work day gone, I focus on long ignored tasks like uncompleted manuscripts’(Lorraine).

‘Many of us would have strongly resisted online teaching if there was no do or die situation with the pandemic. It is strange how smoothly we



shifted to online teaching and it actually delivered, we completed our courses and we completed all assessments'(Henry).

'I think the fact that we were able to teach online was a boon, with many turning jobless overnight. We had a job!'(Frank).

'It kept me sane among all the madness...each session with my students gave me a sense of normalcy. I realized that being able to work even if remotely is a blessing and it makes me grateful and motivated'(Dora).

The Reactions

The faculty members described how behaviors and reactions from peers, students and administration affected their personal experiences.

'Some colleagues constantly complained on how much we are extraordinarily burdened and it demotivates. They used shortcuts like referring YouTube videos to students and in the end they were able to get by, like everyone else, while we broke our heads, I don't know, maybe they worked smart'(Dora).

'There were some pros in our faculty, right on time and a few notches above all. So the faculty WhatsApp group was buzzing with their achievements. They were doing extra mock quizzes, avatars, escape rooms, creating personalized digital platforms, complicated assessment analysis and then there was us, who focused on if our mic and headphones worked properly. These online teaching experts affected my self-esteem for a while but then I learned to live with it and get things going'(Mike).

'Teamwork went down the drain in my course, as a course coordinator it was difficult for me to get job done by other instructors, who came up with disaster stories every day, how their internet failed, how their whole recorded lecture got deleted. They slyly shifted their workload onto me and with the administration already berserk, I refrained from highlighting the issues'(Lorraine).

'We were informed that the students were not happy because we did not simplify lectures enough, or we were giving too much information and it really hurt me because the least you could do is to be thankful'(Frank).

'The students constantly complained and we were told that they are 'overwhelmed', hello! Human here, how do you think the teacher is dealing with the crisis? I would've appreciated if the administration kept these general comments to themselves. Some of my students sent thank you emails right after final exams. You need to chose carefully what to react to and believe in'(Soha).

'People were overambitious, at one point we were expected to write 90 MCQ from seven lectures. Colleagues from the other college were not stressed like that. We embraced all this in a stride but it hurts to even think about it now'(Sam).

'Some temporarily allocated course monitors were really bullying with unrealistic demands and wrong information in a time where human compassion was most needed'(Judy).

Identifying Gaps

The second theme was 'identifying gaps', with two subthemes, 'weak learning environment' and 'ruffled roles'. The study participants described the need to address certain issues in context of factors that affected the learning outcomes in students. They also indicated how the usual balance in their academic roles was perturbed as they switched to a digital format from a brick and mortar setting.

Weak Learning Environment

'We recorded lectures and did virtual sessions in the same manner we speak in our classrooms. We need to do courses and training on online pedagogies like E-TBL or E-PBL or virtual clinical sessions if online teaching is to be continued'(Kim).

'We cannot just give voice recorded lectures; we also need to learn what teaching methods works better in online teaching and what does not'(Ana).

'I feel students are not as engaged in online sessions as they should be. At times, I am not sure if they are all even on the same page. We need to enhance classroom engagement and interactions. Maybe some online tools to monitor and reward or teaching method that improves learning'(Sam).

'Students are not motivated. I know it's a normal response to the pandemic but the teachers don't know how to motivate them... sometimes, the teachers have their blues, this is a strange situation. The quality of an online session depends on the participant's spirit'(Mike).

'The curriculum is for face to face classroom teaching and clinical settings. We need to review it if distance education continues specially in courses with clinical component'(Lorraine).

'My students did exceptionally well, I never saw so many A+ in my course. Of course, there is a good chance they all studied really well but I will support a stronger foolproof online assessment system'(Judy).

Ruffled Roles

'Online teaching job does not mean that you are open to communications at midnight and beyond. I miss the culture that respected work hours'(Sam).

'The course in-charges were expected to deploy online exams. I was horrified that I will make the online exam accidentally available to my students or make some huge blunder. I am not an expert and it would have spared lots of anxiety and sleepless nights if a task force of experts from the IT and assessment unit deployed all exams'(Farah).

'I was initially taking online meetings very seriously, being attentive, alert and right on cue, sitting straight and all dressed up [Laughing] then I slowly turned casual like everyone else because no one really cares'(Mike).

'Uneven task distribution is hurtful and disturbing. A thorough work plan mapping individual tasks and contribution will sort those out who are taking advantage of the pandemic and shifting their responsibilities. It will also highlight contributions of faculty members who shoulder big responsibilities'(Henry).

'Suddenly a junior teacher with less teaching experience but good computer skills are more at ease compared to another very skilled and experienced senior faculty member with poor computer skills'(Judy).

Discussion

This qualitative study aims to describe experiences of faculty members employed in a health science university who transitioned to online teaching amid a pandemic that restricted mobility and enforced an emergency lockdown situation. They experienced a unique phenomenon as they were previously accustomed to face to face classroom teaching. The data analysis yielded two themes which were 'embracing the processes and 'identifying gaps'.



The study participants described their thought process as they shifted into their new roles as online teachers. Some dialogues hinted that although they were initially skeptical and unsure of the process. They gradually acknowledged the benefits of online education, mainly due to the positive response from their students. On one hand there were well reputed seasoned academics, with years of practice in face to face classroom teaching, who suddenly found themselves in unfamiliar grounds. Some of them also dealt with an apparent fear of technology. On the other hand there were certain teachers who were previously not open to the ideas of innovative teaching techniques with components of online learning. These findings support previously reported data on factors impacting faculty attitude towards online teaching and distance education. Bunk J, et al. (2015) [8] reported that fear and lack of excitement plays a significant role in acceptance of online teaching in faculty members [8]. Quality of online education is often questioned and considered less effective than face to face traditional teaching [9]. It is observed that personal interest in innovative teaching methods, passion towards learning about technologically enhanced pedagogy and the tendency to challenge oneself towards higher goals are the driving factors in faculty motivation to embrace online teaching and distance education [10,11].

The present study shows that teachers were pleasantly surprised that their students readily accepted the online teaching process and were completely at ease with the transition. Furthermore, some students who were dormant in classrooms during face to face teaching were more interactive and expressive in virtual sessions. This in turn affected attitudes of faculty members who were initially doubtful towards outcomes of online teaching. Similar observations were made by Ulmer LW, et al. (2007) [12], who reported that faculty members who practiced distance education themselves were comparatively more convinced about better student performance with online education than faculty members who did not have online teaching experience. Inexperienced faculty is usually concerned about lack of technological skills and inability to interact with students in online education [13]. The experiences of the study participants gave them the realization that their students are receptive for distance education using digital platforms. It can be attributed to the fact that these students belong to the generation Z (born in or after 1997), with a distinct preference for technologically enhanced education as they are 'hyperconnected and facile with computers and the internet' [14,15].

Whilst describing their experiences with emergency transition to online teaching amid COVID-19 pandemic, study participants expressed that being able to work from home, helped them cope during the pandemic. They basked in a sense of fulfillment and expressed gratitude for being able to complete their tasks as teachers. They were able to see the silver lining by comparing their work from home experience from that of an average work day in office, and it made them feel sheltered and productive.

Data analysis in the present study showed that faculty members were sensitive towards reactions from peers, students and administration that impacted their online teaching experience. Verbal accounts of their personalized experience indicated that they craved compassion, support and appreciation. It was an inner cry of being understood in an unprecedented crises situation that affected all components of their personal lives. This resonates with experiences of other faculty members who are undermined for their efforts and criticized for being less productive as comprehensively stated by Ling DS, et al. (2020) [5], *'Academics are people, too. ...Our struggles, anxiety, fear and grief are real. We don't all have access to the same resources or support systems,*

and not everyone's struggles look the same. Disparaging messages about productivity are especially toxic to people struggling with their mental health who have been cut off from their support networks'. In context of social and behavioral response to COVID-19, it is usually observed that perceived lack of cooperation renders uncooperative behaviors and requires helpful intervention from leaders to strengthen teamwork [16]. It places leaders (in this case college administration) in positions of great responsibility, which requires them to act more tactfully and sensibly in order to adjust workload or assign task distribution.

The second theme was 'identifying gaps'. Study participants desired a stronger learning environment. They expressed the need of training programs and courses for online pedagogy. They also faced challenges to motivate and engage students during online sessions. Tracking and supporting student engagement in online education has several challenges as student's learning process may vary from each other [17]. This supports the need of a specific online curriculum designed to challenge academic rigor in students, provide consistent and timely student-faculty interactions, enhance collaborative learning and elucidate active participation to enrich learner's development [18]. In the present study, faculty members used the curriculum approved for face to face teaching and used recorded lectures and virtual online sessions in the emergency scenario. For effective continuation of online education, the curriculum requires modifications to incorporate requirements of online education. During extension of on-campus teaching skills and knowledge into online realm, faculty in higher educational institutes becomes learners of online pedagogy [19]. It renders them to be more interested and receptive to training programs on online pedagogy. Success of the online educational program depends on several individual and organizational factors, whereas, institutional efforts to foster the culture for online teaching and learning with adequate training and support is of utmost importance [20].

The study participants missed certain job aspects of on-campus teaching such as regular work hours, fair task distribution and office etiquettes. They burdened unusual responsibilities that contributed to anxiety and sense of unfair treatment. Capable on campus teachers felt undermined due to lack of technological skills. Although, work environment and organizational justice is perceived in different ways by the employees, sensitivity to their concerns regarding fairness by the managers is essentially required [21]. Such issues can be effectively dealt by taking anonymous feedback from the faculty of their experiences and to include their suggestions to formulate an effective action plan. In a time where confident and accomplished teachers feel at loss due to lack of training in online pedagogy and lack of technological skills, their confidence can be restored and cemented by making the process humanly adequate with reasonable expectations and provision of training and support in a harmonious manner.

Limitations

This study showcases experiences of academic faculty members from a single institute. Future research in a longitudinal frame is required to assess long term effects of online teaching on the professional conduct and career growth of faculty members. Data source triangulation is recommended.

Conclusion

This article offers an insight into the unique experiences of faculty members who performed their teaching duties during a pandemic and faced distinct challenges due to the sudden transition to the online platform. They struggled to accept the new role and meet job



expectations in an unprecedented context. It tested their resilience, interpersonal skills and dedication. They evaluated effects of individual conduct and organizational support and highlighted the need of training programs for online pedagogy.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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