

# Online Courses: A study of Online Instructors' Self-Identities

Xiufang Chen

Department of Language, Literacy and Special Education Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ 08028 USA  
chen@rowan.edu

**Abstract** - This study explores twelve literacy faculty members' online teaching experiences with a focus on their identity as online instructors. Data sources include individual interviews, self-study group discussions, and reflective journals. Preliminary findings are presented and discussed including themes such as connections with students, responses to students, accessibility of instructors, assessments, and time and technology demands.

**Index Terms** - Online Instructors' self-identities, online courses

## I. Introduction

Online courses have become a fast growing trend in higher education. According to the recent Pew report [1], seventy-seven percent (77%) of college presidents report that their institutions offer online courses and they predict substantial growth in online learning in the future. Research has been conducted regarding online learning, but most of it focuses on learning effectiveness [2, 3, 4, 5], and little on teacher identity [6].

Gee [7] discusses identity as a 'kind of person' within a particular context; while one might have a 'core identity', there are multiple forms of this identity as one operates across different contexts (p. 99). He emphasizes the multifaceted nature of identity and its changing shape in terms of external influences. This study explores twelve literacy faculty members' online teaching experiences with a focus on their self-identities as online educators, namely, what kind of person he/she is when teaching online. More specifically, the following questions guide this study:

1. How do twelve literacy faculty members identify themselves when teaching online?
2. What positive and negative experiences do these participants encounter in their online teaching?
3. What changes do these participants expect in order to achieve better online teaching experience?

## II. Context of The Study

The participating institution is a four-year comprehensive public institution on the east coast of the States. Faculty in the literacy education program have been requested to develop and deliver online courses since five years ago through the institution's College of Graduate and Continuing Education (CGCE). All online courses must follow the eight-week accelerated format developed by the CGCE at the beginning, though after negotiation two graduate literacy courses are allowed to be offered online for ten weeks. Under contract, the faculty member who develops the course must complete developing and compiling all weekly contents and materials

and get approved by the instructional designer from the CGCE three weeks before the beginning of the course. Then the instructional designer who proves the format and clarity will upload the materials following their policy. The course developer must teach the developed course when it is offered online the first time though he/she does not have to teach it afterwards. Currently, in the literacy program, two undergraduate courses and six graduate courses have been offered online, while more undergraduate courses and the whole graduate program have been advertised as online by the administration and CGCE. All online literacy courses except one were requested to follow the accelerated eight-week module. The literacy program is in the process of negotiating semester-long hybrid or face-to-face regular courses that involves reading diagnosis and clinic. The twelve participating literacy faculty members in this study have all developed and taught online courses, and five of them have taught online courses that were developed by colleagues.

## III. Data Sources

Data sources in this study include individual interviews of the participants, self-study group discussions during regular meetings, and the participants' reflective journals during the online course development and teaching. Triangulation was thus assured through the large and varied volume of data sources.

## IV. Results and Conclusions

Preliminary findings revealed that none of the twelve participants identified themselves as "teachers" while teaching online as they felt they missed the essential element--the responsive teaching as in a face-to-face class where they could adjust their pace, content, and approaches based on students' responses. It made them uneasy and sometimes frustrated that they could not know their students well enough to accurately and promptly identify their learning needs during the course. Often, they felt they were like answer machines "answer (ing) questions about the completion of assignments." Some of them felt "in the midst of a combative teaching experience ... responding to the combativeness and not the content of the course." One participant expressed that "in general, I feel as if my personality is non-existent in the online course delivery format." They felt they were somehow disconnected with their students. Some participants felt they were warriors of their belief when negotiating with administration and the CGCE regarding the best course format for students: hybrid or

complete online, accelerated eight-week or more-than-eight-week courses, and content clear to students in the program or to the CGCE instructional designer who does not possess the same background knowledge as the students.

They did feel like a teacher when developing the course, similar to the preparation stage when teaching face-to-face courses. The positive experiences participants encountered relate to good organizations of the course content, and more importantly student's investment in the course: "I am happy when the students are invested in the course ... and when I see the students interact positively online."

On the other hand, participants expressed the demand of time and immediate feedback when teaching online. They felt the pressure to provide immediate feedback, "as if I am always there, 24/7 online, answering their questions and grading their assignments." They agreed that "it takes way more time (than face-to-face teaching) when considering both the developing and teaching." At the same time some participants were concerned about the lack of training on new technology tools. Finally, they found it troubling when students did not read directions, and when some students felt comfortable with being rude online.

Participants shared that in order to have better online teaching experiences, several areas need to be considered. First of all, courses should be longer than eight weeks when they have the same standards as the regular semester-long ones. Many students felt rushed to complete assignments, and the quality of their work suffers; there needs to be more time to provide feedback to clarify content. It must be noted that online courses are not for every student, every course, and every instructor. Options should be allowed and provided. Last but not least, training on new technologies and new systems should be accessible to instructors, along with how to implement technologies in online courses to promote more effective learning. Currently, the participating institution is in

transitioning from Blackboard to a Learning Management System called Canvas, and some participants are concerned about the shift.

With more and more literacy programs moving online, this study might provide some thoughts to help online instructors get better prepared, adjusted and understood. Hopefully, this study can help administrators in higher education and policy makers to reconsider their online programs to provide better support for faculty members and more effective programs for students. After all, according to the recent Pew report, only 39% of students who have taken an online course say that the format's educational value is equal to that of a course taken in a face-to-face classroom [1].

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