# A Digital Immigrant Venture into Teaching Online: An Autoethnographic Account of a Classroom Teacher Transformed

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## Abstract

This paper presents an autoethnographic account of a classroom teacher's experience transitioning to teaching online within the shifting culture of academe in the 21st Century. After decades as a classroom teacher, the author engages in autoethnography to reflexively analyze her challenging transition to teaching online. The author examines her perspectives, beliefs, thought process, learning, and development. Findings regarding her new way of teaching, thinking, and living as an online instructor may provide insights for others in academe.

## Keywords

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## Acknowledgements

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*This paper presents an autoethnographic account of a classroom teacher's experience transitioning to teaching online within the shifting culture of academe in the 21st Century. After decades as a classroom teacher, the author engages in autoethnography to reflexively analyze her challenging transition to teaching online. The author examines her perspectives, beliefs, thought process, learning, and development. Findings regarding her new way of teaching, thinking, and living as an online instructor may provide insights for others in academe. Keywords: Autoethnography, Online Instruction, Transformative Learning, Teaching, Higher Education*

## Introduction

Through qualitative inquiry, I study others' changing beliefs, perceptions, and their storied lived experiences. I acknowledge my own socio-cultural constructivist theoretical positionality, the lenses through which I perceive and interpret the phenomena I explore and share people's stories and meaning-making. I seek to listen to those who otherwise may not be heard. Being a teacher also informs my understanding of the world. For decades, I invested in the art and science of my pedagogical practice, conceptualizing the teaching-learning relationship situated within the face-to-face, interpersonal context of the classroom.

### Changing Contexts in Higher Education

While teaching in higher education, I witnessed important changes. The demographics of students have changed significantly: "More than half of today's students are older...Most work full or part-time...and represent the largest market segment of those who will attend college in the foreseeable future" (Falk & Blaylock, 2010, p. 15). Traditional age college students have also changed significantly. They have grown up in a world where digital technology is ubiquitous. The exponential proliferation of information and mobile devices is changing the way people live, think, learn, and relate to one another. The digital age presents a new culture to navigate. The change in college student demographics and the shifting culture necessarily presents an impetus for changing how we meet those students' educational needs. Flexibility remains paramount for student accessibility and persistence in higher education. However, education as a system has struggled with reinventing itself and remains entrenched in traditional approaches to teaching.

The specific context within which I live and work adds another cultural layer to my teaching experience. I am a white middle-class middle-age woman from the northeast region of the United States (US), an outsider transplanted in the US-Mexico borderlands teaching at a predominantly Hispanic Serving Institution (I). The majority of students are adults working full time who have families they support. When I first arrived, I empathized with their need for night classes and welcomed an evening teaching schedule. I found the diversity and cross-cultural milieu of classroom teaching at an I dynamic, interesting, and filled with opportunities for me to grow and learn along with my students. My first semester in my faculty role at the I,

initially a small teaching university, required on campus classroom teaching. The faculty responsibilities of teaching, research, and service emphasized and valued excellence in teaching as the top priority.

Given the changes in student demographics and the changes in technology, and considering the context where I teach, online education may become the force of creative destruction of traditional classroom-based education. Numbers of students taking online classes has increased, with as many as one third of all students in higher education taking at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Like it or not, our digital world is changing the context of our praxis and the culture in academe.

> Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) use the term figured worlds to refer to the social contexts of practice. Practice theory attempts to describe how individuals shape, and are shaped by, the cultural worlds in which they live. (Jensen & Lewis, 2015, p. 137)

As a tenure-track assistant professor, the stakes are high for me to perform within this figured world of academe, "Bordieu's (1988) English translation…describes the production of faculty work or practice within the social field of higher education as a high stakes game with winners and losers" (Jensen & Lewis, 2015, p. 136). The expectations of the competitive social field of academe and tenure status attainment within this context framed my academic practice. For my second semester as a new Assistant Professor, I was assigned to teach a graduate course 100% online. I had never taken an online course, had no frame of reference for online learning, and the prospect of teaching online held little appeal. Convinced that online teaching and learning could not be as effective as classroom teaching, I recognized the transition to online instruction would be a challenge for me.

To navigate the social field and perform within the context of a rapidly changing recently consolidated, distributed campus, I situated on the US-Mexico border. I felt pressured to adopt an entirely unfamiliar practice that shaped and ultimately transformed the way I think, teach, work, and live.

## Methodology

Previously, I drafted a reflective essay, organizing my thoughts chronologically in an autobiographical account of my past teaching experiences then leading into online instruction. My experiences resonated with colleagues. Subsequently, I searched the literature for studies that explored similar transitions. Indeed, I found literature to review. Yet, I set my essay aside. About a year later, I began writing with a small group of colleagues who also came from elsewhere to teach at our particular I. During our discussions, I shared my perspectives on teaching online. My colleagues encouraged me to leverage autoethnography to study and further explore my experiences.

I read about autoethnography as both method and product. I read several published autoethnographies, and then I endeavored to try this new (to me) qualitative research approach. As Chang (2016) states regarding, "The benefits of autoethnography…it enhances cultural understanding of self and others; and…has a potential to transform self and others…" (p. 52). Choosing to study my new way of teaching, leveraging a new way for me to conduct research seemed apropos. When my colleagues suggested autoethnography, I realized the value of their suggestion. Chang (2016) asserts that, "Autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners-such as teachers…gain profound understanding of self and others…" (p. 13). It seemed like a good fit.

I embarked on a journey into the research process of autoethnography to describe, reflexively explore, systematically analyze, and write about my experiences with the intention to understand, learn, and grow. I embraced the reflexive process as a mechanism for exploring my conflicted sense of self and shifting identity, priorities, and perspectives to discover a new balance in my life amidst the demands of teaching, scholarship and service in a digital age: "The writing process evokes self-reflection and self-analysis through which self-discovery becomes a possibility" (Chang, 2016, p. 41). Chang also suggests that, "The study of other self-narratives helps readers compare and contrast their lives with those of self-narrators" (p. 41). It is my hope that sharing my process and findings may help fellow digital immigrants reflect on their own experiences and perhaps learn from mine.

## Concept

Rather than focus on others, I chose to explore my own shifting perspectives as I navigated my transition from classroom teacher to the new role of online instructor. I endeavored to "…interrogate what we think and believe…challenge our own assumptions…rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be" (Jones, 2013, p. 10, as cited in Custer, 2014, p. 1). I wanted to unpack my practice and the way I negotiated the layered socio-cultural field of my life as an assistant professor at a large I: "Bordieu's theory of practice describes the everyday behaviors and actions as reflective (reflexive) of social understandings of the fields or social contexts in which individuals engage (1988b)" (Jensen & Lewis, 2015, p. 137). The autoethnography I share now is the product of that process. (Chang, 2016; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

## Research Questions

For this study, I sought a deeper understanding of the following:

- Within a rapidly changing context in academe, how has the transition from classroom to online teaching changed me as an educator?
- How do I gain a sense of self-efficacy and integrate the notion of being an online instructor into my identity and life as an assistant professor?

### Study Design

For this autoethnographic study, although exempt from formal review of research on human subjects, to address ethical concerns in research I remained conscientious in only referring to general composites or categories of people (e.g., administration, colleagues, students). I avoided naming specific people in my field notes and treated my data as confidential.

First, I outlined a plan for the project. I identified existing data sources from both my on campus and online courses that might yield relevant insights. Next, I listed field data I needed and planned a systematic process for data collection and analysis.

Utilizing Chang's (2016) Writing Exercises 5.1 and 5.2 (pp. 157-159) that suggest writing chronologically, I outlined a timeline of my teaching career; I also composed time cycles, listing activities and experiences chronologically by academic year, semester (including the Summer terms), month, week, and then daily. I also modified some of Chang's exercises. For example, Writing Exercise 5.4 (p. 78). I listed specific teaching routines I established in my classroom teaching and elaborated on their importance in my instruction. Then, I listed teaching routines I set up for my online courses and described their importance. In my variation

of Writing Exercise 6.2 (p. 169), I conceptualized it as akin to member-checking for accuracy, as I periodically discussed my work with colleagues.

I endeavored to contextualize my study from a socio-cultural perspective. My concept of culture continued to evolve and aligned with Chang's (2016) proposed collectivist, interactive, and fluid "work-in-progress concept of culture" (p. 21), much like how intersectionality of identities fluctuate in response to context. I agree that, "The concept of culture is inherently group-oriented, because culture results from human interactions with each other" (pp. 16-17). This perspective remains relevant to considerations of generational differences and interactions among those who grew up prior to the advent of the digital age and those for whom the Internet and mobile digital technology has been ubiquitous since birth.

I recognized multifaceted layers and that "…culture consists of cognitive schema or standards that shape and define people's social experiences and interactions with others" (Chang, 2016, p. 21). Through engaging in this study and writing, I also found that, "…observing and analyzing differences between self and others from a distance are helpful practices in understanding other of difference" (Chang, 2016, p. 28). I remained cognizant of my multiple insider-outsider vantage points.

I conceptualized my study's triadic balance much like a mobile, suspended and constantly in motion, balancing among the foci of self (auto), socio-cultural context (ethno), and analytical writing process (graphy) with varying emphasis on each at different stages throughout the study. I leveraged self as "a lens to look through to gain an understanding" (Chang, 2016, p. 49) of my individual story situated within the broader context of higher education in the digital age.

## Data Sources

Data collection focused on: participation, observation, document and instructional artifact review. Systematic data collection from multiple sources included artifacts collected from both on campus and online courses (syllabi; assignment descriptions, instructions, rubrics and requirements; my daily or weekly reflective field notes, observations and freewriting, course evaluations, weekly course announcements). I collected each semester's course evaluations of my teaching that included anonymous student comments, which I sorted chronologically and by course instructional delivery model to compare classroom versus online student comments. From the last four years, I gathered my colleagues' peer observations of my teaching in both on campus and online courses. My annual tenure-track dossier reflective narratives of my teaching served as my yearly reflective field notes. My syllabi each semester, in particular the versions of the same course taught multiple times in succession, whether on campus or online, served as data sources as well.

As a field observation notetaking strategy, I leveraged a voice to text dictation App that allowed me to capture my thoughts and stories while I engaged in verbal processing to make meaning of my experiences. I surprised myself in using technology to identify the narrative reconstructions I revisited frequently to get my thoughts out of my head and onto the page. Writing and reflecting to make sense of my experience, informs what I have come to know, and who I have become. I concur with Custer (2014), "…autoethnography can uncover many different feelings within the writer" (p. 1). Questions arose pertaining to my identity, which exposed an unanticipated professional and personal vulnerability.

In my pedagogical practice, I frequently leverage narrative and storytelling to illustrate concepts, share representative examples from lived experience, and offer insights. My students appreciated my stories, "I dearly loved the stories about her life and teaching experiences that she has acquired through her life time she shared with us… I love her personal stories" (Course evaluation, Spring 2014). Writing about my observations, experiences, and process

acknowledges my "positionality of self to others [as] socially constructed" (Chang, 2016, p. 29). Subsequently, it seemed natural to use narrative from my personal experience as data in my endeavor to grow and transform as a teacher and scholar.

I chose autoethnography as a method for examining my sense of being both an outsider and an amateur with a tinge of impostor syndrome in the borderlands and online culture of the digital world, crossing real and metaphorical cultural borders transitioning from classroom to online teaching at an I.

## Findings

The following findings are organized by themes that emerged across data sources.

### Overview

After 25 years teaching in educational contexts ranging from early childhood, to a residential school for the deaf, to a rural public high school in central Kentucky, to higher education at a predominantly white research institution, to the largest I in the continental US, I conceptualized myself as an effective classroom teacher. Growing up in a family that valued education – my father a research professor and my mother an artist who volunteered in our public schools and created learning experiences as a matter of course – I wanted to become a teacher from a very young age. I have been invested in learning and passionate about teaching for as long as I can remember. Throughout my life, I witnessed and experienced significant changes in education from comprehensive efforts to reform schools to advances in technology I could not have imagined. Although not the first to do so, I evolved and adopted, adjusted and accommodated technological advancements. I recall pivotal points; the irony of being advised by my high school guidance counselor, "you don't need to learn to type; you're in the college-bound track. You will have a secretary," then fast-forward to typing my doctoral dissertation on a laptop using three fingers. I have never had a secretary.

### Computers

I recall an epiphany about computers. Before the advent of the Internet, in the high school where I taught, trying to use the six desktop computers in a makeshift lab felt so foreign to me. Frustrated, I could not comprehend how they worked. It felt uncomfortable, disorienting, letting go in a leap of faith when my colleague explained, I didn't need to know how they worked, I just had to use them. Now, I am dependent on the powerful computer in the palm of my hand, my smartphone, and I still do not know how it works, nor a fraction of its capabilities.

### Encounters with Technology

Although I would not consider myself resistant to change (Bruckman, 2008), I would not characterize myself as an early adopter of technological innovations (Sinek, 2011). I am not inherently intrigued with technology. I am more inclined to try something if it mediates an issue, improves efficiency, or meets an identified need. I am not inclined to adopt new technology and then try to find a use for it. I certainly do not stand in line for hours and pay exorbitant prices to be the first to own the newest version of a device. My daughters and my students, digital natives, represent the first generation to grow up in this digital world. They cajoled me into adopting new and innovative technology. With the advent of the Internet, proliferation of smart phones and various devices, so many rapid advances in technology, I gradually adopted and adapted, but for very specific reasons. For example, at the insistence of

my graduate student assistants, I transitioned from a (massive) paper planner (plastered with sticky note reminders, hand written weekly schedules, daily to-do lists, and cryptic appointments squeezed into the calendar squares) to an electronic calendar. Although I duplicated entries in my digital calendar and carried around my paper planner for about a week before finally letting it go, I embraced the technology; I never looked back. Now I cannot imagine keeping track of everything without automatic reminders from my digital calendar that synchs with my all my devices and toggles from month to week to daily lists.

## Encounters with Online Education

I gradually incorporated purposeful teaching technology into my classroom, yet I never engaged in online education. Conceptually, online education always seemed unclear, confusing, and ill-defined to me. I imagined online education as a form of impersonal electronic correspondence course. Subsequently, online education of any kind seemed to be something others did, particularly those intrigued with technology. I had the attitude that online courses were, "…a low-end, second-string alternative to the traditional face-to-face classroom" (Horn, & Staker, 2015, p. 32). However, to respond to student needs, the previously rather fuzzy concept on the periphery of my academic world came into sharper focus and knocked insistently on my pedagogical door, not to be ignored.

Less than two weeks before classes started, the department chair directed my colleague to teach his graduate course 100% online. He had no experience, no training, and like me he had never taken a course online. He shared his decision that the class would meet online synchronously in the course management system; he became a disembodied voice as he lectured to invisible students. Anonymous students typed few questions in the system's chat feature. He admitted his frustration and lack of efficacy, but he had no experience, training, or models to follow. He noticed students logged in and walked away; after he concluded his lecture and ended class, they didn't logout. His experience prompted me to see the inevitable trajectory of increasing online courses.

## Unprepared

What I observed with my colleague aligns with one of Lackey's (2011) findings, "An overwhelming theme among participants was the lack of voluntary assignment to teach online and the little notice given to prepare once an assignment was issued" ("Theme 5: Short Notice," para. 72). Assigning instructors to teach online with little or no formal training is much like sending them off to a foreign land to teach a class in an unfamiliar language and culture. Left to their own devices to navigate this immersion experience, professors tend to resort to replicating the familiar, primarily lecturing by default. What may have been dynamic classroom interactions and discussions on campus become truncated chat room exchanges, if the students participate at all. Students anticipated that experience in my course:

> Originally (considering the course was online) I expected the same boring lectures, boring lectures like reading straight off the book or presentation… just complete tasks transactionally. The class was everything but that…not the boring type. We got engaged with different learning aids like videos, presentations, games, etc. her method of teaching is both interactive and lends itself to a diverse group of learners. (Course evaluation, Fall 2015)

Without ample time to plan in advance, the support of an instructional designer and robust infrastructure, models for online course options, and training in best practices for online

teaching, many professors cannot conceive of any other way to teach online than to lecture. It comes as no surprise that 17 years later the assertion remains true, "Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (Prensky, 2001, p. 2). This characterized my experience exactly.

## New Attitude

With 7.1 million students in higher education taking online classes, I needed to adopt a new attitude about online education (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Digital immigrant or not, I certainly did not want to become obsolete! Additionally, in the throes of institutional consolidation to create a new university, the small teaching university where I had been hired to teach on campus, became part of a large distributed institution with sites located throughout a 43,000 square mile region with campuses as far as 150 miles apart (a 2-hour drive one way). To avoid loss of productivity and to meet the needs of students across this vast region and beyond, the mandate for professors to leverage technology and rapidly move more instruction online became abundantly evident. Subsequently, rather than wait for the inevitable assignment, likely at the last minute when I would be ill-prepared, I agreed to teach my core masters level graduate course 100% online via an asynchronous delivery model for optimal flexibility for the students. Thus, the journey commenced.

## Navigating the New

As a professor who teaches educational psychology, I set about the challenge of navigating these uncharted online waters by relying on my knowledge of and experience with applied learning theory. I reflected on the theoretical and research-based foundations underpinning pedagogical practices I employed in the classroom. I endeavored to translate dynamic classroom learning experiences into an online format that would be most conducive to meeting the needs of diverse students. I tentatively embraced the challenge as an opportunity to learn and grow. Little did I know how daunting the challenge would be, and how much I would be compelled to change, learn, and grow.

The process of reflecting on my classroom pedagogy and the key elements that result in student engagement and meaningful learning guided my decisions as I designed my online course. Given the demographics of contemporary students, and the unique population of students at the I, many of whom English is not their native language, I anticipated that many would be non-traditional students mixed in with digital natives, much like the diversity I had seen in the classroom. Additionally, I considered the unique demographic composition of the students; as many as 90% of our students are first generation college students, and many are from marginalized communities with limited resources.

## Keep It Simple

I sought to keep the course design nimble, simple to navigate, and well-organized, accessible, and manageable for everyone, including me. It seemed evident that the primary added value of taking an online course would be flexibility and convenience for working students, students beyond our region, and particularly those with families needing to avoid the otherwise long commute to the different campuses. Thus, I designed my course delivery as asynchronous; students could engage in the course whenever convenient.

Knowing that establishing a routine provides structure and efficiency for students, and they are better able to anticipate and plan accordingly, I structured the course with a weekly

routine to keep everyone progressing through the semester. I worked full time and commuted an hour to campus as a graduate student; likewise, I anticipated that working students would need the time on weekends to complete assignments. I set each weekly module and assignments due each Monday. I left all weekly modules open from the first day and throughout the semester. Students could work ahead or refer back to previous weeks. Those who needed additional time had everything available up front.

**Steep Learning Curve**

The university's course management system proved not intuitive to me at all, and likely not intuitive for many students. Determined to keep the course navigation simple for both my students and myself, I relied heavily on assistance from a cadre of educational technology instructional designers. One infinitely patient support person sat with me on countless occasions to walk me through the system to set the functions I wanted, and she never failed to answer when I called to ask her to remind me how to do it again and again. Clearly, although a seasoned educator, and someone relatively comfortable with the technology we use on a regular basis, I was ill equipped for the technical experience required to manage the process of setting up my online course (Lackey, 2011).

**Time Commitment**

Frustrated, I greatly underestimated the investment of time and persistence required. Administrators who thrust faculty into this foreign land without training, support, and an indigenous guide, illustrate that, "Research suggests campus administration still do not understand the level of time and commitment teaching online requires of a faculty member, therefore hindering the level of support and resources allocated…" (Lackey, 2011, Introduction, para. 2).

Elements of on campus classroom I wanted to retain and translate into the online environment included developing rapport. I conceptualize teaching and learning as a relationship. I focused on facilitating collaborative social construction of knowledge in peer groups; designing meaningful individualized assignments; requiring recordings of individual and collaborative group presentations; fostering online discussions of reading assignments; and providing the opportunity for students to share supplemental materials, including multimedia resources. Students' remarked the difference in my course:

> I did more work than a typical discussion board…students were asked to research and apply the different learning theories throughout the semester. Various assignments and projects were completed by the students to monitor and assess our understanding of the presented material. One of the aspects that I really enjoyed about the class was that it was all online, but with the interaction and engagement that happened one would have never guessed it. Dr. Lewis is a professor that can take a mediocre topic; such as, learning theories and make it fun! My favorite part was having to record our presentations as part of the learning process. I had never had to do anything like that before so, it made the class that much more enjoyable! (Course evaluation, Fall 2017)

**Flexibility**

For added flexibility, I provided the opportunity for students to self-select due dates for most assignments. Allowing students to select their due dates for papers and for posting video

recorded presentations for the class to view, provided the flexibility for students to align their assignments with their schedules, work, and family responsibilities. For example, "Each student will sign up for a date to work with a partner to design and lead a 10-15-minute interactive warm-up activity based on principles of adult learning to launch one of our weekly class discussions" (syllabus, Summer 2017). It also afforded me time to provide meaningful feedback to students, with their assignments distributed throughout the semester, rather than all submitted at the same time.

After reading my introduction post and clicking on the link to my video recording welcoming them to the course, students clicked on another link to a voice-over screen capture recording of the syllabus where I explained each expectation and elaborated on details of each assignment. Not only did the students get to see me and get a sense of who I am, the course set up, and my expectations, but my recordings modeled what I would have them do later. I tasked students with posting a written introduction in the discussion board, as well as record and post a link to their own video introductions. The students viewed each other's recordings to get to know each other, and then I knew they could access and work the technology they would need for some of the course assignments. We worked through technical issues right away with this low-stakes task, which greatly reduced problems later with posting individual and group video presentations.

## Self-Selected Due Dates

In a wiki page everyone could edit, students signed up for groups and due dates for assignments on a first come first serve basis, "Group Presentations: Each student will sign up for two weeks during the term to work collaboratively in a small group of 3 on a group presentation" (Wiki, course management system, Summer 2017). I indicated on the form the limit for how many people could sign up for each Monday to submit their assignments, which ensured the due dates remained distributed relatively evenly throughout the semester. Students also signed up for groups and the group members worked with different people each time they presented to get to know more of their classmates. I intended for the group assignments to apply social constructivist learning theories in practice, principles of Andragogy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015), and cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). It became immediately evident who were my digital natives or tech savvy non-traditional students and who were not.

## Learning from Students

The tech savvy students tended to scaffold their less adept peers (and me). Transparent about my own challenges with the online environment, I modeled that it was okay not to know, to struggle and make mistakes, and that we all learned from the experience. "Unlike other professors I am not afraid to 'mess up' or 'ask a ridiculous question.' I know that she wants me to succeed and that she cares for me. Interestingly enough I work harder because I do not want to let her down" (Course evaluation, Spring 2016). I learned a lot from my students! For example, one of my students suggested a way to leverage technology to provide more meaningful feedback on students' papers. After reviewing students' papers and making comments with open track changes, I recorded a voice-over screen capture for each as I elaborated with more specific suggestions. Students could replay the recording as frequently as they needed. This approach received overwhelmingly positive and appreciative responses from students. This comment represents frequent feedback from students, "I think receiving detailed feedback on my writing style is going to impact the quality of work I submit in other classes" (course evaluation, Fall semester 2015). Although this process proved extremely time

consuming, the return on my investment in the time required to record my detailed verbal feedback paid dividends in the quality of subsequent papers.

Using an Infographic as the visual reference for presentations in lieu of a PowerPoint or Prezi also came from a student's suggestion. Students seemed to enjoy the creative element of collaboratively designing and composing Infographics rather than slides. Students also responded well to supplemental materials such as TED talks, YouTube video clips, podcasts, and blog posts related to further enhancing our understanding of the theories we studied and expanded on the textbook assignments. My students and I kept a wiki page of resources and "technology goodies" students shared so that everyone had more tools for their teaching-learning toolboxes. We collectively developed our digital literacy skills. Perhaps my course activities seem common to those who have been involved with educational technology and online instruction, but it was all very new and foreign to me, as well as many of my students.

Another strategy I learned from a student, an experienced online instructor herself, was to establish explicit discussion board expectations. In order to conduct meaningful, ongoing, interactive discussions asynchronously, it worked best if everyone engaged in the discussion board regularly, optimally every day. I adopted her suggested requirement for each student to participate in the online discussion any time on at least three of the five discussion days each week.

The student discussion leaders and I monitored the quality of posts and prompted for more in-depth discussion when necessary. The value placed on discussion participation and the explicit expectations facilitated lively and insightful discussions, frequently noted by students in course evaluations as the most meaningful part of the course.

> Students are expected to view the presentations and supplemental materials, and then read and respond to the facilitators' posts and classmates' posts with appropriate insight and reflective remarks representative of the professional discourse in the field a minimum of 3 of the 5 days the discussion is available (Weds.-Mon.). Quality and depth of the discussion is the goal, rather than frequency or volume of posts. (Syllabus, Fall 2016)

Students have been responsive, appreciative, and positive frequently commenting in their course evaluations how they have never had an online class like mine. My course evaluation ratings remained consistently high and included constructive feedback, and occasionally a critical message, typically a complaint about the kind of work required.

> Struggling with the format and lack of lectures and notes as well as problems with timeliness of material availability. I understand however, the format is a work in progress (and Dr. Lewis herself was wonderfully approachable and competent). It would be better if this class is taken by itself because it is a lot to learn. I think that [Dr. Lewis] should make course work descriptions available prior to the first day of class. It allows for students to decide if they have the time to devote to the class. (Course evaluation, Fall 2016)

## Communication

Just as I did with my on-campus classes, each time I taught an online course, I tweaked the design a little bit according to the feedback I received from students. As a seasoned classroom teacher with a high sense of self-efficacy, teaching in this foreign environment as an intimidated novice felt cumbersome, awkward, daunting, and proved extremely time-consuming. I learned to be very explicit, after the following student comment:

> Never take another asynchronous online course again…if the final project is poorly defined from the beginning, and the understanding of which is not improved by further "clarification," take that as important signs for action. (Course evaluation, fall 2015)

In communicating directions for activities or explaining the assignments, although I thought I was clear, it became evident that some students didn't understand or appreciate what I expected them to do.

## Member Checking

For member checking, I processed moments of my own cognitive dissonance, and unpacked my attitudes, assumptions, and perspectives by talking with my millennial daughters, who have more experience in online environments, to better understand some students' perspectives. I found myself making meaning through discourse; in a recursive manner, continuing to reflect on illustrative stories I told and noted patterns. Those notions, in looking back, emerged as initial themes that informed my practice. I realized how I made sense of the world around me through talking through experiences until they distilled into a cohesive narrative.

## Analysis

I conducted a qualitative analysis of the comments on course evaluations over time. Similar to Chang's (2016) inventory activity (p. 77), as I collected data I used a recursive, ethnographic process, managing my data by labeling, coding, categorizing, sorting, identifying themes, and organizing as I made decisions for data reduction. For example, I sorted course evaluation data by negative and positive to then look for patterns. I frequently processed my data through conversations with colleagues; making sense through sharing, analyzing, and interpreting. I recognized a pattern among my notes on some of the students' repeated questions, requests for clarification across semesters. I puzzled, why are they doing this and why are they asking me that? I had to step back and re-evaluate my written directions.

I used an iterative process of multiple readings, open coding, sorting, and thematic analysis of the narrative data from the multiple data sources. I sorted the types of words the students used, the words I used in my reflective notes and instructional artifacts, and two initial overarching themes emerged: one cluster of words, phrases, and comments related to students' perceptions of me as a person:

> Dr. Lewis is very accessible and clearly wants to see her students succeed…She was very friendly, optimistic and open minded…kind hearted and caring…She was very nice, caring, and genuine…Cute northerner...proper, straightforward, gentle but firm…She just moved to Texas and it seemed like she wanted to make a positive impact in our community…shared her experiences and expressed interest in the Mexican American culture. (Course evaluation, Fall 2016)

The other cluster represented student perceptions of me as an instructor – how I taught:

> Dr. Lewis actively communicated with us via multiple sources (email, blackboard, announcements, video (blackboard). This was probably one of the most positive experiences I've had in any classroom (virtual in this case) setting. She genuinely fostered the idea that learning the material was more important

than the score at the conclusion….and enhanced my interest in actually knowing what I was studying and reading. The service learning project (SLP) provided a valuable opportunity to apply class material in a real-world setting. I am grateful. (Course evaluation, Fall 2017)

The most frequently mentioned comments related to my responsiveness.

**Presence Online**

To become an effective online instructor required establishing what Edwards, Perry, and Janzen (2011) revealed as key characteristics in their study of exemplary online educators. Through daily engagement in course discussions, conscientious feedback on assignments, and a high level of responsiveness to students, I sought to "challenge and affirm learners [and] establish clear classroom presence" (p. 101). Unlike on campus classes, I engaged in online courses multiple times daily. Online students expected me to be available and accessible beyond weekdays, business hours, traditional class times, and office hours:

I had trouble with an assignment…I emailed her very late thinking she would respond in the morning…she always answered my emails right away…and this helped me feel at ease…she was quick to respond by email or even live video chat. She was always available within 24-hour turnaround. (Course evaluation, Summer 2016)

Maintaining a consistent online presence, although time consuming, seemed to convey and be interpreted by students as caring.

**Caring**

The data reflected predominantly positive comments indicating I had managed to convey that I cared, even in an online environment, where I initially doubted I could.

Dr. Lewis is one of the most caring and sweetest professors I have ever had…She truly cares about her students and is a "down to earth" professor that tells it like it is. She is very professional yet shares with her students about her life and this is important because it helps us understand the lessons. (Course evaluation, Spring 2016)

Reading all of the comments and analyzing them, and then reflecting on my interpretation helped me grow, learn, and really focus what I could do to further my own development and calibrate my changing practice. Conscientious planning, in advance, also conveyed that I care, "Class is super organized so you know what is expected…The assignments were carefully planned and relevant" (Course evaluation, Spring 2017). Yet, planning for online courses proved significantly different from planning for classroom teaching.

**Preparation and Planning**

As I analyzed the data, I recognized how much I learned – how much my perspective, beliefs, and attitudes about online education changed. It has been an intellectually, technologically, personally, and pedagogically challenging journey; yet it remains rewarding. As I compared artifacts from my on-campus classes and my online courses, not only had the

pedagogical preparation and delivery been quite different, but other important aspects of online teaching warranted further consideration. Designing and preparing the course required a significant investment of time up front, long before the semester commenced. Whereas, planning for on campus classes consisted of preparing the syllabus. Planning how I would deliver instruction did not need to be completed in advance; I distributed my efforts throughout the semester, typically a brief weekly investment of time planning for class.

**Availability and Interaction**

Online students tended to reach out and interact with me much more frequently; students in on campus classes waited until class meetings to ask questions. Teaching online dominated my everyday responsibilities, and I engaged in the course and with the online students frequently (email, phone, video conferencing, discussion boards, instant messaging, text messaging, mobile app, etc.). "Dr. Lewis was quick to respond by email or even What's App live video chat. She was always available" (course evaluation, Summer 2017). Frequent interactions occurred daily at various times in order to maintain my online presence in the course (Kelly, 2014). Students posted in discussion boards, text messaged, and emailed all hours of the day and night, every day of the week and on weekends, even over semester breaks and holidays, creating a sense of urgency, impatience, and an expectation that I am to be immediately responsive. Teaching online proved to be a different kind of commitment and reaped different kinds of rewards than traditional classroom instruction.

> Dr. Lewis was always there to help us. She cultivated our learning by allowing us to learn and work on the material at our own pace, while still giving us the opportunity to take away a lot of useful information and skills from this course. We had the opportunity to work on service learning projects and that really gave me a different perspective on teaching and giving back. (Course evaluation, Fall 2016)

**Flexibility**

As much as my students appreciated the flexibility of an online, asynchronous course, I also enjoyed being able to teach from anywhere on my smartphone whenever convenient for me. As challenging and time intensive as it proved to be, surprisingly, I enjoyed teaching online.

The positive feedback from my students motivated me to invest the time required. However, other colleagues teaching sections of the same course differed in their online delivery. One continued with the synchronous lecture approach and another primarily utilized the textbook publishing company's online materials and tests. Students compared our expectations, assignments and approaches, and some of the comments on course evaluations reflected the inconsistency across different sections.

**Comparing Professors**

Each semester I typically had a student express on the course evaluation that he or she did not like the amount of work or the shared responsibilities in collaborative groups, "I was not excited about the group work and community project we were require to do and lack of lectures. Not having lecture notes (or lectures) made it really dependent on the ebook and also sink or swim for better and for worse" (Course evaluation, Fall 2016). Apparently, some students preferred the transmission model of lectures over active self-directed experiential

learning. However, the following comments are representative of the majority of the feedback I consistently received from students:

> Other professors are not as involved or engaged in online courses compared to the experience I had with Dr. Lewis this semester. In one instance, I went an entire semester taking an online course without receiving any feedback, emails, or interactions from the professor. Most education courses are taught read a chapter, write about it, quiz, and repeat. This formula does little to teach and makes learning a task…I did really appreciate how Dr. Lewis participated in the discussions with us. Dr. Lewis' involvement and active approach was most helpful and greatly appreciated. She was different in the ways she approached her class. She was constantly involved and was very supportive. (Course evaluation, Spring 2017)

## Online Training

Ironically, even though I had been teaching online for three years, the university adopted a new policy which required online training to qualify instructors to teach online courses. During the Summer, I took the online asynchronous certification training modules, my first online course experience as the student. Better late than never, I suppose. The online training seemed to model a read and test approach, which I found tedious. In my field notes I wrote, "Wow! My online class is a whole lot more engaging than this training! I hope this isn't the model they're expecting us to follow!" To be trained in a modality that conflicted with my experience with good classroom pedagogy and principles of andragogy, resulted in cognitive dissonance for me, and I resented it. I found myself railing against the training and procrastinating. I didn't like it at all. I disengaged, complained to my husband, and felt frustrated with what I deemed superficial activities. Ultimately, I begrudgingly completed the training, just to get it over with and be able to move on to teaching my online courses how I saw fit.

## Frustration

Shortly after completing the training, I received an invitation to take my online course through a formal review process with university instructional designers and a national reviewer. Confident in the course I had designed and refined, I agreed to take it through what turned out to be a very rigorous review process.

I felt conflicted. Just as I started to feel more confident and consistently received validating feedback from students and colleagues, going through the review process felt adversarial. I felt defensive, indignant that someone with no expertise in my field questioned my instructional decisions; it felt as though they questioned my expertise. Only following the one prescriptive template would be approved. I felt forced to change my online teaching. Not convinced that delivering the course their way improved upon how I had been doing it, I struggled, challenged, argued, and pushed back for a year. I rebelled against being forced to put my course into prescribed, automated, redundant generic boxes, and I felt like my original creative, interactive, and engaging elements had been stifled. I felt stifled. Required to teach the course twice in the new way, I worried the course evaluations would be scathing, I assumed students would hate it. I assumed I would hate it.

**New Design and Increased Enrollment**

The new course design simplified my role in facilitating the course and alleviated some of my daily time commitment responding to discussions; it reduced the depth of involvement I previously engaged in providing students with feedback on assignments. Also, the new delivery model allowed for increased enrollment. Suddenly, the class size more than doubled. From a university administrative perspective, I understood the financial rationale for leveraging such a model.

After teaching the course in that lockstep generic modular manner, surprisingly I still received very positive course evaluations:

> Though I do not enjoy online classes, Dr. Lewis made it enjoyable and extremely easy to navigate…discussions were really great and something I had never had in any of my other classes. I had a lot of classes where you had to answer a question and post the answer but never discussions like this. Truthfully, this is the first class where I actually felt that the discussion boards were useful in my learning. In my previous experiences, they often tend to include general information lacking detail and responses are often just agreements by classmates. Discussion in this class actually felt like one that would take place in a class that met in person. When she commented on our discussions and gave meaningful insight and her own opinion, she made us feel like we were in an actual classroom–which was very different and great at the same time…I appreciated how frequent Dr. Lewis was engaged in the weekly discussions as well. Her insight and links to the TED Talks helped provide better understanding and insight to the chapter readings…My most memorable experience was recording my own and watching other students' introduction videos. It was not something I have had to do before and it was a really nice way to make the online course feel less impersonal. (Course evaluation, Fall 2017)

I had to consider the possibility that my beliefs and perspectives may not be the only way to know and understand the online instructional milieu.

**Feeling Isolated**

I missed the relationships and individualization my previous course design cultivated. At this point, I discovered that I had been teaching exclusively online for six semesters, plus Summers. As nice as it had been to teach from home or while traveling, I realized how isolated I felt. I grieved the loss of human contact and the interpersonal interaction of the classroom. On so many levels, teaching online had proven far more challenging and different than I anticipated. It had changed not only the way I taught, but it changed the way I lived.

There have been times when I felt overwhelmed and frustrated, and times when I felt very isolated and craved the in-person, interpersonal social interaction of on campus teaching-learning relationships. On the other hand, teaching online increased flexibility for me, as well as the students. The benefits to teaching from home, or teaching from anywhere (e.g., on a boat, in an airport, from a conference), participating in online discussions using an App on my phone, resulted in a new way of conceptualizing myself as a teacher. I realized the amount of time I invested in online teaching and the level of ownership I committed to this new role. I felt like I was, "always on, always at work, and always on call" (Turkle, 2011, p. 202). Perhaps instant gratification has been cultivated by society's ubiquitous use of technology and the Internet. I

was convinced that being immediately responsive, within reason, would result in even higher course evaluations and more comments from students characterizing me as accessible and responsive.

## Struggles

The incessant infusion of online interaction into my professional and personal life blurred the lines between work space and personal space, work time and private time. I grappled with the intrusion, lack of separation from work; work seemed to be borderless with few boundaries in the online environment and culture of the digital age. The expectation of constant availability resulted in a paradigm shift for me. Perhaps it reflected a generational cultural shift, but the contrast on campus versus online courses revealed significant differences. I am not convinced that everyone recognizes the pervasive time investment required for online courses. It is not comparable to the time involved in classroom teaching, and work-life separation gets lost.

Two days before the semester started, without notice or explanation, the course enrollment of my hybrid online doctoral class doubled again. The course design intentionally structured in-depth, interactive, student-centered seminar discussions. Doubling the class-size resulted in more than double my time investment and significantly complicated how I facilitated the course. Students expected both asynchronous and synchronous online engagement. I felt tremendous pressure; I felt a deep responsibility to mentor students and maintain the integrity and quality of my instruction and their learning experience. I could not disregard my identity as a dedicated, culturally responsive teacher. I did not want to sacrifice the care and integrity of my teaching, the quality of the learning experience, and the carefully designed online environment that I created. I struggled. I felt discouraged, and it was difficult for me when decisions that impacted me and my students appeared arbitrary or uninformed, decisions made without an explanation regarding the driving force behind them. In expressing my concerns to administration, I felt summarily shut down. I felt my perspective, experience, and expertise had been dismissed; I had been silenced.

## Resistance and Resentment

Yet, as a tenure-track assistant professor, when I found myself in that crucible, given no choice but to deal with it, rather than give up I chose to embrace the inevitable challenge and endeavored to find a way to manage and do it well, even when I didn't know exactly how. From my semester, monthly, weekly field notes (mostly emotional rants), I analyzed the intensity of my emotions, and sought to unpack my frustration and explore my thoughts and attitudes. I went through this a number of times during my online teaching journey. I felt like an amateur, again and again, having to re-evaluate, re-conceptualize, reframe and really reflect deeply and swallow my resistance. Repeatedly, I had to take a step back and go through the feelings of frustration and resentment at times when I felt myself balking at something beyond my control. I examined where that resistance came from, determined my circle of influence, and decided how to respond and move forward in the best interest of students and my future in academe. For the course that doubled in enrollment at the last minute, I decided to split the course myself and taught it as two sections, without recognition or compensation for the additional workload. The time commitment and responsibility more than doubled.

**Boundaries**

At the end of that semester I wrote, "something <u>has</u> to give. I feel like I scrambled the entire semester, never catching up, not my best teaching for sure. I never got into my groove-never able to establish a manageable routine. This is untenable." This compelled me to change; I established a boundary:

I will respond to emails Monday-Friday within 24 hours of receiving them. Emails received on Sundays will be responded to on Monday. In the case of an emergency, you have my personal mobile number you may text – see syllabus. (Instructor statement in course management system, Spring semester 2018)

Analyzing my description of overwhelm, my near burnout, resulted in establishing a "day of rest" to intentionally unplug; reclaiming my Sundays as a space outside of the ever-present digital tether. The pressure to publish for tenure also demanded that I carve out more time to devote to research and writing. I had to disentangle myself from 24/7 online teaching. Managing more balance in my time commitment to teaching, research and service demanded a shift.

**Closing Thoughts**

This study compelled me to analyze and reevaluate my cultural perspectives, my ontological beliefs, my values in circumstances when I felt pushed, and how to remain true to my identity and integrity. It has not been easy, but it certainly transformed the way I think about teaching and my identity as a teacher. The study of my journey's unanticipated challenges compelled me to dig deep, problem-solve, lean into frustrations, and ultimately let go, learn, and choose to grow.

Journeying into the unfamiliar world of online teaching prompted unexpected transformations in how I conceptualized myself as an educator. I explored ways to integrate student autonomy and tailored the learning experiences to their own interests by leveraging a course embedded service-learning component. I reclaimed some of my sense of teaching self-efficacy and integrity by finding ways to make the course my own again. I realized how important agency remained for me.

When I ventured into the world of online instruction, I had not anticipated where the journey would lead. I assumed I might occasionally be assigned to teach an online course. Now, I am seldom assigned to teach a class on campus. I have *become* an online instructor.

## Discussion

Referring to myself as an online instructor had not been part of my self-concept story. Through autoethnography, I re-evaluated my beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and my identity. As Dewey (2005) suggests, reflection is invaluable for growing, learning, and improving my practice. Comingling teaching and research through data analysis related to my new practice served as a catalyst for my growth and transformation in academe.

**Enhanced Understanding**

Chang (2016) asserts, "doing, sharing, and reading autoethnography can also help transform researchers and readers (listeners) in the process" (p. 53). I developed a much deeper understanding of my students and my positionality in our digital world. The process did indeed,

"enhance cultural understanding of [my]self and others; and…[because] it has a potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building" (p. 52), it helped me explore what it takes to bridge the digital cultural divide while situated in the broader culture of academe in the context of 21ˢᵗ Century teaching and learning at an I.

## Parsing Responsibilities

My identity as a teacher who takes pride in the quality of relationships I cultivate with my students drives me to attend to my students first, be as responsive and ever-present online as possible. I turn my attention to my students and courses as my first priority. Only after attending to my teaching responsibilities do I turn to my research, writing, service, and life beyond work. As a classroom teacher, I plan and feel organized, focused, efficient and effective. There are clear demarcations for how I spend my time, and I have separation from my teaching to attend to my home life and scholarship. With online teaching I feel scattered, messy, and boundaries are blurred. I struggle to find balance and to parse out teaching from my home life and other responsibilities, including research and service.

## Unanticipated Impacts

When my values and beliefs clashed with the expectations I imposed on myself and those imposed on me at an emerging research university, I felt an acute sense of internal conflict. I endeavored to study and write experiences that I "perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of [my] life" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 275). As David Purcell (2013) states:

> This reflective process enables me to assess the effectiveness of classes, become more efficient and precise with my course preparation, have a stronger sense of mastery as a teacher, and more deeply understand the relevance of [my field] for the scholarship of teaching and learning. (pp. 13-15)

Perhaps I was more reticent and less of the open-minded educator who embraces change as I imagined myself. This transition to teaching exclusively online, which had not been my intention, changed me as an educator, as a professional, and changed my daily life as a teacher and learner. I did not anticipate how much teaching online would challenge my perspectives and beliefs, "…human beings are regarded not only as bearers of culture but also active agents who create, transmit, transform, and sometimes discard certain cultural traits" (Purcell, 2013, p. 20). It has been transformative.

I experienced a paradigm shift in how I see the world, academe, myself, my role, my choices, efficacy, expertise. I still love teaching in the classroom, on the rare occasion I do. The interpersonal social construction of knowledge rejuvenates me. During my walkabout in online teaching and learning, I found a way to channel my passion to embrace the challenge of developing relationships while teaching and learning online.

## Credibility

Considering autoethnography as a method, reliability equates with the reader's determination of my credibility as the narrator. If my narrative speaks to readers about their own experience or that of someone they know, then the believability and relatability of my work is generalizable in that way. In particular, autoethnography is expected to be useful (Bochner, 2002). My hope for sharing my experience, analysis of my own growth and

development, and my transformation as an educator through this process, is that perhaps others will find my autoethnography useful.

## Reproducing to Re-evaluation to Recognition

Reflecting on my scholarship and professional practice, I learned how I read the figured world of academe in this digital age. Initially trying to replicate my classroom environment online, I discovered the extent of my own ignorance; I did not know what I did not know. The autoethnographic process called into question my teaching self-efficacy and my cultural assumptions about teaching and learning. I had to re-contextualize, re-conceptualize, and subsequently re-evaluate my thoughts and attitudes. I discovered a new challenge in connecting theory and practice. I had to re-examine my own communication, and my paradigm for teaching and learning. I realized issues I had not anticipated, not only pragmatic issues but personal and cognitive. A different teaching identity emerged through this process of struggling with my steep learning curve and journeying beyond my comfort zone. I discovered my own shortcomings and subsequent growth and development. Now, I relate to students better as they struggle with their own learning curves, outside of their comfort zones, to grow and develop and learn. I became a more patient facilitator of growth and cross-cultural communication and understanding. I became cognizant of what I do to enact empathic, culturally responsive teaching, demonstrate an ethic of care in my pedagogy, and I recognize and support those struggling and engaged in the experience with me.

## Tensions

My analysis revealed unanticipated internal and interpersonal tensions. Teaching online blurred the distinctions and spaces between my personal and professional life. It disrupted work-life balance. Eisenbach (2016) echoes and validates my experience:

> I transitioned from my position as a traditional schoolteacher to a new role as an online instructor. I found myself in a place where my own ideologies regarding classroom care and communities were at odds with my newfound teaching… As a teacher who believed in the power of cultivating caring relationships within the classroom, I decided to look at my own abilities to care for my new students within the online context. (p. 604)

During this study, I endeavored to explore my ideologies, share my story, and find my own voice in an unfamiliar discourse.

## Shifting Cultures

I sought to reconcile my conflicted sense of self and acknowledge my shifting priorities, to discover a new balance in life among the demands of research, teaching, and service. Through this process, I better understand the shifting culture in academe and the institution. I remained cognizant of the generational, geographical, and socio-political, on campus and online situated cultural context of my study as an, "investigation contextualized in the sociocultural context of the researcher" (Chang, 2016, p. 57). I sincerely hope that my study provides insight into the 21st Century educational environment in higher education. Even a seasoned educator can become an online instructor.

**Recommendations**

I encourage other seasoned educators to consider garnering the courage to cross into the unfamiliar landscape of online education. Perhaps visit and acclimate to this foreign land, before inevitably becoming a digital immigrant, or worse a refugee thrust into it without adequate preparation, resources, or guidance. Rather than holding out, like those who finally got CDs, DVD's and mobile phones only because cassette tapes, VHS video tapes, and land lines became obsolete. Consider infusing teaching technology into on campus classroom instruction. Frame the journey into online instruction as an opportunity to learn and grow. Digital natives are welcoming and appreciative of efforts to engage them, and non-traditional students can relate to and appreciate empathic encouragement as they, too, struggle to navigate the unfamiliar online environment and culture of academe in a digital world. I can attest that the transition is difficult but doable.

**Novice Transplant**

Autoethnography has likewise been more difficult than I anticipated (Wall, 2008). Leveraging intentional curiosity resulted in recognizing I am not the expert I imagined. To reflect and revisit my preconceptions, scrutinize them in comparison with my lived experience, I questioned my self-confidence. Should I seek to return to classroom teaching? Or, do I embrace this new trajectory and continue to teach online, strive to be adaptable, and refine my online teaching identity? Is there even a choice? I sorely miss teaching in the classroom, but this challenge to know myself differently and come to terms with my new identity, both as an outsider transplanted in the US-Mexico borderlands and a digital immigrant who crossed instructional borderlands, may be exactly where I am meant to be.

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With gratitude, I want to express my heartfelt appreciation for my students and my colleagues who have embarked on this learning journey with me. Thank you for your patience and support.

**Article Citation**