Adapting to the Digital Classroom: Challenges and Creativity in Online Learning

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Abstract

This study focuses on the growth opportunities of online education by delving into the challenges and creative aspects identified by professors and students. This symbiotic relationship is vital to online learning, creating effective communication, emphasizing practical skills, and unlocking students' potential. The research paper employs a phenomenological qualitative research approach, interviewing eighteen faculty members in Canada who respond to the two interview questions. This is compared with recent literature reviews to comprehend the challenges and opportunities presented by online education during and after the post-COVID-19 pandemic.
The paper suggests that active engagement, reviewing recorded lectures, adapting to mobile learning, minimizing multitasking, and increasing interactive assignments are necessary to foster students' academic and professional development.

Keywords: *Digital Classroom, Cellphone Learning, Online Education, Challenges, Canada, Interactive Assignments*

1. Introduction

Online education, online learning, and virtual learning are interchangeable for this study. Online education is the next new normal that has gained momentum over the past few years, particularly during and post-COVID-19 pandemic. It has changed the way we view the education industry. Online education has created a path for academic institutions and professors to find more economic advantages and different lecture methods. In this research paper, the two interview questions are under consideration to see the challenges and creativity of online learning that has been adapted in digital classrooms by professors. By clearing out this picture, the paper will play an essential role in increasing the profitable outcomes for educational institutions by increasing the number and quality of prospective students. This paper will help create business strategies for academic institutions by understanding the challenges of online education and creating a pathway for online students to gain practical experience. This will create a win-win situation that would benefit internal and external stakeholders in the long term, as online education is here to stay permanently.

2. Interview Questions

This study addressed the following two interview questions by interviewing eighteen faculty members across Canada.
1.   What difficulties have you encountered in online education, and what strategies have you employed to overcome them?
2.   How does online education stimulate students to think critically, acquire hands-on experiences, and unleash creativity?

3. Literature Review

Successful people are lifelong learners; there is no better investment than ongoing learning. Online education helps with online learning while keeping up with other life-based commitments and responsibilities (Berman, 2022). Education is a means to achieve sustainable human-economic development where leaders play many roles in promoting educational institutions' growth and development and creating human capital (Almutairi, 2020). Online education can be seen as a stress test

for digital teaching and learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has touched every walk of life, including education (Ronkowitz & Ronkowitz, 2021). Education institutions – the creators of human capital, have led the learning beyond the campus wall by empowering the learners on a global scale where they can collaborate with students in different parts of the world and embrace flexibility and affordability with education institution curricula (Belsky, 2019).

Institution-based strategies should focus on maintaining profitability, survival, and necessary funding during a sudden shift in the economy, black swan events, or natural disasters to run a success smoothly (Armstrong Jr., 2020). When leaders are more prepared for unpredictable events and unfortunate circumstances, they envision beyond the unseen and create an effective and efficient system to include all (Smith, 2021). Faculty self-efficacy supports students' behavioral, cognitive, and social engagement. Thus, the faculty must have professional development, clear expectations, and communication to add value and meet their instructional goals (Moyer, 2022). However, faculty members' self-efficacy is equally important, such as whether they can adapt to online education, their experiences in dealing with different demographics, and whether they have the professional knowledge and education where their self-efficacy was measured in the past. Faculty members and students' self-efficacy in online education with the use of technology has a direct relation (Corry & Stella, 2018). Self-efficacy is crucial as mental health problems and disabilities appear on the surface during these events that would stay behind the picture in normal circumstances. Therefore, cognitive, behavioral, environmental, and emotional regulation are significant; reflecting charts, self-managing, and problem-solving should be a focus in the professional development program (Zimmerman, 2019).

According to an American survey, online education is considered the same as or better than face-to-face education. It suggested that favorable views of online education have increased in the USA; the pandemic has changed people's priorities. Spending time with loved ones is only possible when using technology in education, work, and other areas of life becomes a norm. The technology that is used in online education is not new. Technology has been in use for a long time for online education. It changes the general public's perception, attitude, and views. Online education has brought out the best in students who are genuinely dedicated to their education journey while keeping a full-time work position and carrying on other life responsibilities. Students prefer to go online with education and asynchronous. Online education programs have grown from various departments, such as data science boot camps, to art programs or online high schools. A student-mentor program is also valuable for getting a higher rate of completion degrees in online education. It keeps students aligned with their goals; mentors can question them accordingly. Mentors greatly encourage mentees toward their aims, beliefs, and dreams (Busteed, 2022).

In 1994, it was said that computers and phones would be the new ways of getting college degrees. The article predicted the future of online education. It also indicated that online education would be in high demand and no classrooms would be available. Long-distance study would become the norm. Today – roughly 25 years later, online education is part of learning. It has become the main drive for profits for educational institutions. It has a high education enrollment rate across the USA. Online education is the primary driver of education in US universities. The share of online education has increased by over 30% in the past decade since 2010 compared to in-class students. One out of three students took at least one class online in 2018 pre-COVID. The COVID-19 pandemic carries some credit for the online education boom, where studying for online degrees was normalized (Selingo, 2021).

The online education sector kept growing, but it is also imperative to change the mindset of faculty members still stuck in 1994. They should understand that assignment submissions on social media, practical experiences, and simulation learning are standard. Also, the young faculty members are already in alignment with young students as they both have a similar mindset about education and technology to the point where they believe that online words should not be used with education as learning means learning, not online or face-to-face. This learning brings the community economic development in the regional economy and creates more growth opportunities for everyone. The need for employees and employers will continue to grow as the world population grows. The question is not about keeping online and face-to-face education but about how students consume education. The traditional, residential, and full-time face-to-face education was and will always be here. It is not going anywhere. The question is about the increasing need that requires access to shorter, just-in-time programs that equip them with skills, abilities, and other characteristics to get a job in two months, not after four years of completing the traditional degree (Selingo, 2021).

Creating a well-rounded educational experience involves the collective efforts of governments, strategic leaders, faculty, and technology. This encompasses initiatives by the Government of Canada in online education, faculty addressing low student motivation and interest in online learning, the dynamic interaction between students and faculty in the online environment, and the evolving trends observed in online high schools across Canada (Khaliq, 2023). These experiences are equally important to empower everyone in Canada's online education system.

4.   Methodology

The paper used phenomenological research with a qualitative approach, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 faculty members across Canadian education institutions to ask them the two interview questions. The interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted for 30 minutes on average. The criteria for interviewing faculty members included the online teaching experience.

4.1 Qualitative Results

1.   What difficulties have you encountered in online education, and what strategies have you employed to overcome them?
All the participants suggested that getting students engaged and participating in online classes had been the most challenging part. They had wanted to keep the camera off and the mute button on. They multitask while listening to online lectures. Sometimes, they cooked, lay in bed, and did other chores. Multitasking had been everyday during online lectures.
Technology had not allowed professors to unmute or turn their cameras on, creating another difficulty in online education. Human touch had not been available in online learning. Professors had strongly emphasized that interaction was significant in online teaching and would help achieve strategic growth for educational institutions.
Even though professors had had one-on-one virtual office hours, students had not utilized them. This also created a distance and learning barrier between professors and students. Therefore, faculty members recorded lectures so students could watch them later at their convenience. Another strategy was to allow students to use cell phones and take online lectures on their cell phones, as professors understood the demands of millennials.
Also, professors allowed students to submit social media assignments such as a small TikTok video, a podcast, or even a post on Facebook. This created an interactive and exciting environment for students to be more interested in online learning. Professors had also made smaller lectures, as millennials' attention span had been deficient. They had asked students questions occasionally in classrooms to create enthusiasm.
In online asynchronous courses, professors ensured that they replied to students' emails quickly and provided as many details as possible about the course, starting in the course syllabus so students were not confused. They had known from day one what to expect in their courses. The choice of words in an online asynchronous course had been critical as it could create anxiety among students. However, professors firmly believed that online education required self-starters and motivation. It had been more student-oriented, and the burden of online learning had fallen on students.
2.   How does online education stimulate students to think critically, acquire hands-on experiences, and unleash creativity?
Professors believed that online education played a crucial role in providing students with practical experience, considering the integration of online learning and work as an integral part of the post-COVID-19 lifestyle. The omnipresence of technology in various aspects of life made online education a platform that pressured students to present themselves professionally on computer screens, teaching them essential tools and etiquette for future job opportunities. Online presentations on platforms like Zoom differed significantly from face-to-face presentations, offering students valuable lifelong skills.
Engagement in group projects in the online setting exposed students to working with diverse personalities, pushing them beyond their comfort zones and fostering professional growth. Professors contributed to the learning environment by sharing personal and professional life stories to inspire and actively engage students in the online education experience.
In this context, professors embraced the role of facilitators, emphasizing that students should take responsibility for their learning. The belief was that students should fully immerse themselves in online

education, utilizing tools like Google for self-directed learning and personal growth. The professors advocated that students recognize the need for dedicated attention in online education to unlock better and broader opportunities in the future.

A critical perspective held by professors was the emphasis on acquiring a skillset rather than merely obtaining a certificate. Online learning tools empowered students, enhanced their technological skills and boosted their confidence and proficiency—qualities deemed essential for success in real-life scenarios. Assignments within the online program were designed not only to increase students' comfort with online tools but also to enable them to assess their personal growth throughout the online learning journey.

5. Recommendations

After analyzing the qualitative results from the literature review, I found that challenges and creativity in online learning continue to adapt to the digital classroom. However, professors' attitudes create a massive difference in students' learning.

1- Active Engagement: Students should learn to engage actively in online classes. They should understand that online learning is crucial to their learning and professional development. Professors should also create a healthy environment to ask and answer questions. They should encourage participation from students.

2- Review Recorded Lectures: Students should review recorded lectures to learn at their own pace. However, professors should also focus on creating smaller lectures to clarify doubts and reinforce understanding by asking students to review content.

3- Minimize Multi-tasking: Students should take responsibility for their learning and focus on one thing at a time. So, they should only focus on their learning and find a quiet space at home where they can focus peacefully without distraction from their classroom material and course content.

4- Adapt to cellphone learning: Professors should create smaller lectures and increase mobile learning, as this is the way online education would continue. Millennials are more comfortable using cell phones, so learning through their phones will always help them learn on the go.

5- Increase interactive Assignments: Professors should encourage student participation by creating interactive assignments that not only make them learn but also allow them to get practical and hands-on experience. They should focus on the practical part of the course rather than the theoretical. Social media, videos, and podcasts are interactive tools to make learning fun for millennials.

6. Conclusion
7.

To conclude this paper on Adapting to the Digital Classroom: Challenges and Creativity in Online Learning, professors and students require collaborative efforts to create a win-win situation for education institutions, students, and professors. Students need a self-motivated learning approach to make the most out of opportunities created by online learning. Technology continuously evolves online education, so emphasizing practical skills is vital to understanding and adapting to new learning environments. Professors should also understand the needs and requirements of millennials and support them in their growth by understanding this generation. As online learning becomes an integral part of our society post-COVID-19 world, it is essential to continue to improve and transform by preparing students for the challenges and opportunities presented by online education.

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