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The shift from face-to-face to online teaching due to COVID-19: Its impact on higher education faculty’s professional identity

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

With the COVID-19 emergency shift to online teaching, it is timely to investigate the impact of online teaching on teachers' professional identity, namely their beliefs and roles. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data from four faculty members working at different UAE universities, aiming to incorporate teachers' voices and practices in the research process. Findings showed teachers' professional identity underwent some phases of instability as tensions arose between the way they viewed themselves, their beliefs, and their practices in the online environment. Teachers experienced changes related to their pedagogical, managerial, and social roles and practices.

1. Introduction

With the developments in distance education over the past two decades, research has been giving increasing attention to online learning. Most studies have mainly focused on researching online education from the students’ perspectives, while less attention has been paid to teachers’ beliefs of teaching and learning as well as their teaching practices and roles in the online environment. Moving from face-to-face to online teaching, teachers experience a completely different educational context which might impact their roles, beliefs, and practices (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2013), and the way they handle this change is still unclear (Jonker, März & Voogt, 2018). Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) argue that “teachers’ perceptions of their own professional identity affect their efficacy and professional development as well as their ability and willingness to cope with educational changes and to implement innovations in their own teaching practice” (p. 750). According to Nias (1989), as cited in Beijaard et al. (2000), people feel insecure when they face changes that impact their self-image and personal identity; nevertheless, they can develop, adapt, or even radically change their self-image; the same applies to teachers (Beijaard et al., 2000).

With the COVID-19 outbreak in March, face-to-face education systems had to undergo an emergency shift to online education to ensure students receive their education under safe conditions. Immediate changes in restructuring classes to full-time online modes demanded fast learning of new technologies and the development of new professional identities in most cases. Significant disparities between the online contexts and face-to-face contexts might have necessitated the enactment of different teaching practices and roles and the development of online teacher identity, especially as many experienced teachers turn into novice ones when they move to teach online. According to much literature, developing new identities entails constant renegotiation of the roles of teachers and students (Comas-Quinn, 2011), as it also involves teachers’ interpreting and reinterpreting the experiences they go through (Beijaard et al., 2000). Thus, the urgent move has contributed to the stress and burdens of university teachers and staff who were already trying to juggle teaching, research, service duties, and work-life balance (Houlden & Veletasianos, 2020). Far and beyond learning how to utilize particular digital tools, resources, and online teaching methods, online teacher preparation programs, universities and policy makers must provide appropriate support to the teachers throughout their identity development as teachers’ professional identity has a significant impact on their self-confidence, performance, as well as their curricular and pedagogical choices. More research is needed to offer a better understanding of how the move from face-to-face to online teaching has impacted teachers’ professional identity. Therefore, in this study, UAE higher education faculty are interviewed to expound the impact of this shift on their professional identity, as with online teaching, academics’ views of learning and teaching, as well as their role identity, can be challenged (Hanson, 2009).

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher professional identity

Research in the field of teaching and teacher education stresses the significance of teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Olsen, 2010). Earlier research viewed
professional identity as a stable and sustaining collection of characteristics, attitudes, values, and experiences that individuals attribute to themselves in a particular profession (Cooley, 1902, as cited in Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons, 2006; Schein 1978, as cited in Ibarra, 1999). However, more recent postmodern perspectives argue that teacher professional identity is not a stable formation or an inborn quality of a teacher, but rather a continually changing, dynamic, and ongoing process that develops through lifetime and professional experience. Its development is affected by the teachers’ personal features and past experiences as well as their professional contexts, containing significant others, knowledge, expertise, practices and beliefs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Olsen, 2010; Reeves, 2018; Taylor, 2017).

There is no consensus on what forms a teacher’s professional identity due to the different conceptualisation of professional identity in the literature on teaching and teacher education (Beijaard et al., 2004). The conceptualisation of identity proposed by Gee (1990) can inform our understanding of teachers’ professional identity. According to Gee, identity, which is the “being” at a specific time and place, can change according to different contexts and can be vague and uncertain at times (Gee 2000–2001). contends that people have multiple identities depending not only on the type of person they are but also on the way society identifies them. Nonetheless, he argues that people have a ‘core identity’ that is more consistent across contexts. In their review of teacher identity literature, Beijaard et al. (2004) indicated that teachers’ professional identity is an ongoing process of “interpretation and re-interpretation” of experiences, entails both person and context, involves almost congruous sub-identities, and counts agency as an essential element (p.122).

Much research has also highlighted the importance of reflection and self-reflection in professional identity (Keltjermans, 2005; Lasky, 2005). Keltjermans (1993) emphasised the connectedness between the personal and professional self and their change over time and highlighted its five interconnected parts: self-image, self-esteem, job motivation, task perception and future perspectives. Lasky (2005) sees professional identity as the image that people use to represent themselves as professionals, and it comprises people’s expectations of themselves and their capabilities, depending on their past experiences and the view of others, all of which influence their actions.

Akkerman and Meijer (2011) utilise ‘Dialogical Self Theory’, combining a modern and postmodern perspective, to give a more comprehensive view of identity, as they claim. They argue that teachers’ identity is both unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, and individual and social. According to Holland and Lachicotte (2007), teachers develop their identity in relation to their “inhabiting roles, positions” (p. 103), and this identity acts as an informative basis for their performance. Others identify academic identity as continuing creation of a consistent personal and professional life narrative (Sheridan, 2013), and as connecting several narratives to establish the most acceptable identity shown to others (Smith, 2010). In turn, teacher identity seems to influence teachers’ practices, the subjects they teach and their interaction with their students (Izadinia, 2013). McNaughton and Billot (2016) conceptualise academic identity as “the ‘being’ that informs ‘doing’, where being is one’s way of viewing the world and oneself based on individual values, beliefs, and attitudes, and doing is the way of living proceeding from this” (p.644).

2.2. Teacher professional identity in flux

Establishing a professional identity plays a pivotal role in the success of a teacher (Olsen, 2010). Identity development is a complex process marked by consistent interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences and encounters (Beijaard et al., 2004), as the teaching profession undergoes continuous changes (Pillen, Beijaard & den Brok, 2013). Much research agrees that people can have multiple identities, which might change with time, giving rise to new identities that are built and rebuilt in different contexts (Richardson & Alsup, 2015).

While developing their professional identities, teachers need to “incorporate their personal subjectivities into the professional/cultural expectations of what it means to be a teacher” (Alsup, 2006, 27). Thus, becoming and being a teacher is also personal and finding a balance between the personal and professional sides of the process is vital in developing a professional identity (Pillen et al., 2013). While evolving, teaching identities might go through periods of stability and fragmentation due to internal and external factors (Day et al., 2006; McNaughton & Billot, 2016). This fragmentation can worsen when there is no congruence between teachers’ personal and professional development and the shift, which reflects on the workplace as identity impacts one’s “sense of purpose, self-efficacy, motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and effectiveness” (Day et al., 2006, p. 601).

In this study, it is assumed that some teachers experience tensions and ambiguity while shaping their online professional identity. For some, shifting from face-to-face to online teaching might lead to an imbalance between the personal and professional side of being a teacher, and “what is found relevant to the profession may conflict with the personal desires from teachers and what they experience as good” (Beijaard et al., 2004, p.109). However, still as McNaughton and Billot (2016) argue, “contextual influences on identity formation and tensions between identities may not be resolvable but may nonetheless be productive” (p.645).

2.3. The context of online teaching

Throughout the past few decades, the field of adult and higher education witnessed quick changes associated with making education more accessible and improving communication and information technologies (Conceição, 2006). In the UAE, an increasing number of academics mostly employed technologies to supplement conventional instruction and enhance course delivery. Despite that, traditional face-to-face teaching methods were the most dominant in UAE universities (Ati & Guessoum, 2010). Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, educational institutions made massive change programs in weeks and had teachers move their teaching to various online platforms, which were new to many. In fact, teaching online entails more than just supplementing conventional instruction and requires teachers to reconsider their underlying beliefs about teaching and learning and their roles as educators. In the new context, most teachers were often left unaided and untrained to cope with the task of operating in an entirely technology-mediated context, where policies and performances are drastically distinct from the face-to-face context (Stacey & Wiesens, 2007). Thus, teachers’ professional identity might get affected as “because of their emotional investments, teachers can experience vulnerabilities when control of long-held principles and practices is challenged by policy changes or new expectations for standards” (Day & Kington, 2008, p.8).

2.4. From face to face to online teaching

2.4.1. Teachers’ beliefs

Much research has explored the impact of faculty’s beliefs on their teaching practices and goals (Hativa & Goodyear, 2002; Kane, Sandretto & Heath, 2002), and technology teaching practices are no exception (Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich & York, 2006). Teachers hold beliefs about teaching and learning based on emotional interpretations, premises, or intentions (Jonker et al., 2018). As teachers move from face-to-face to online teaching, they need to reconsider their held beliefs about education (Baran, Correia & Thompson, 2011; Comas-Quinn, 2011; Gerbic, 2011).

According to Steel (2009), teacher beliefs are tacit and intricate, and they can either act as a barrier to change or a means to successful practices. Embracing technology in everyday teaching is not simple as even teachers who are well-versed in technology do not necessarily see its value in pedagogical uses. Teachers whose pedagogical beliefs are not supported by using technology tend to either avoid using it or
utilise it in ways unrelated to their pedagogical beliefs (Jonker et al., 2018; Steel, 2009). However, teachers whose pedagogical beliefs are in congruence with the use of technology succeed in online contexts (Gerbic, 2011).

In a case study in a UK university (Hanson, 2009), teachers expressed their preference for face-to-face teaching as they felt secure demonstrating their subject expertise through lectures and more successful giving immediate feedback. Teachers highlighted the importance of campus experience to students, giving more weight to face-to-face contact with academics than technology use. They showed resistance to online teaching as online teaching led to disembodied identity and disrupted their academic presence. Research reveals teachers who shift from a face-to-face to an online teaching context start seeing themselves differently. In their study of exemplary teachers’ shift to online teaching at a US university, Baran et al. (2013) mentioned that “while deconstructing and remaking their teaching personas [professional identity], they had to rethink themselves as teachers and resolve the tensions of not having the conditions that they had in traditional classrooms” (p. 30). Even though their participants successfully adapted their practices and had new representations of their ‘selves’ online, their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning stayed the same.

Simon (2012) conducted case studies, one of which examined the impact of online teaching on US higher education faculty after moving from the face-to-face to the online context. The findings uncovered a disrupting impact online teaching had on teachers’ identities. Despite their appreciation for the flexibility online teaching provides, many participants reported their preference for face-to-face teaching, claiming that time management issues, lack of online pedagogical and technical competence, the absence of verbal cues, plagiarism, and difficulty in providing timely feedback were all barriers to online teaching. As a result, Simon noticed online education generates conflicting conditions that disturb instructors’ identities in relation to their online teaching responsibilities. In addition, the participants felt they were not able to implement their face-to-face pedagogical approaches, leading to fragmented online identities. Many participants believed face-to-face teaching provided a richer and more gratifying teaching experience and more pedagogical freedom, while when teaching online, they found fewer chances to set clear expectations, lacked technological knowledge, and received little support. On the learning level, the participants believed online students lacked motivation, reflecting that attitude on the teacher’s motivation, but despite that, some appreciated the easy access online courses provide to a wider population. Remarkably, among the few teachers who liked online teaching are those who admitted their dislike to performing in public and their strong online persona. One of the participants perceived the online platform to be the best venue to implement her teaching beliefs of being a facilitator and coach and ensure that her presence is not controlling. Apparently, those few participants who enjoyed teaching online appear to have best leveraged online teaching. However, the findings of this case study revealed that most teachers complained about the constraining nature of online courses on a personal and pedagogical level, rendering them unable to be the teachers they long to be. This sense of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment reflect on the teachers’ self-efficacy, inevitably affecting their professional identity.

2.4.2. Teachers’ roles

Studies confirmed that, with this shift, academics need to view themselves differently as professionals, and engage in new practices, as their role changes with the change of the educational paradigm (Berge, 2009; Conceição, 2006). The academics’ changing roles are reinforced by the new responsibilities they take while teaching online, starting from the development phase till the end of the course (Conceição, 2006).

Berge’s Instructor’s Roles Model was one of the first models which classified teachers’ functions online into four separate categories: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical (Berge, 1995). When the pedagogical role refers to being an educational facilitator, and the social part refers to creating a supportive environment conducive to learning, the managerial role refers to establishing rules and norms and managing students’ communication. The technical role refers to offering learners a clear and comfortable use of technology (Berge, 2009). Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) based their research on a model of critical thinking and practical enquiry, including three elements of teaching and learning: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. They came up with three principal online teachers’ roles: the educational designer, discourse facilitator, and subject matter expert. In their study of changing teacher roles online, Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter (2002) named three faculty roles: cognitive, affective, and managerial. The cognitive role shifted from simple mental processes of learning and information retention to deeper cognitive involvement. The affective role shaped by the connections between students, teaching bodies, and the classroom atmosphere demanded new means of expressing emotions, and the managerial role related to course management required more organisation and precision. Much distance education research has used various terms to refer to the role of the higher education instructor, but they mostly viewed the online teacher as a “facilitator” and the teaching process to be learner-centred (Conceição, 2006). Researchers used different terms such as a counselor, assessor, technologist, designer, administrator, researcher, content producer and expert (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeles & Tickner, 2001). Kaleta, Skibba and Joosten (2006) noticed teaching became more student-centred online, and teachers’ interactions with students shifted as students were given more control of their learning, and teachers embraced more facilitative roles. In their study of how academics negotiate their professional identity during a shift to technology implementation, McNaughton and Billot (2016) realised that even when the academics’ and the institution’s pedagogical value align, the everyday ‘doing’ and ‘being’ of communication technology namely videoconferencing were not in congruence with teachers’ personal values and beliefs, which led to role and identity ambiguity.

There is a proliferation of research on the impact of online learning; however, much of this investigate students’ experiences and teaching strategies, not giving enough attention to academics’ perceptions of online education and its influence on their teaching roles and professional identities (Hanson, 2009; Stacey & Wiesenberg, 2007). Thus, in this study, UAE higher education faculty are interviewed and the experiences they went through as they shifted their teaching to a new mode of delivery are explored. Delving into these teachers’ experiences helps uncover the processes they go through while teaching online and offer valuable insights into changing academic roles and identities. Findings will indicate the right support needed from educators and university policymakers to help teachers develop in the field of online education and maintain coherent professional identities. The research questions are as follows:

Q1. How does the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching impact higher education faculty’s beliefs of learning and teaching?
Q2. How does the shift from face-to-face teaching to online teaching impact higher education faculty’s roles?

2.5. Methodology

In this study, the paradigmatic stance aligns with the interpretive paradigm. In this paradigm, reality is constructed by the participants who consciously get involved in an activity and make meaning through their experiences, interpretations and historical and social background (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Higgs, Cherry, Macklin & Ajaw, 2010). With these varied subjective meanings, the researcher can understand the intricate perspectives of the participants rather than only sort out their ideas into categories (Creswell, 2014). This study utilizes a qualitative exploratory research approach whose aim is to investigate participants’ experiences and not to generalise data (Vishnevsky & Bean-
lands, 2004). The main aim is to delve into the teachers’ experiences and gain a better understanding of the impact of the shift from face-to-face to online teaching on teachers’ professional identities, namely their beliefs and roles.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

In qualitative research like mine, researchers’ main concern is not to include a sample representative of a certain population but to recruit “only those participants with rich experiences in the phenomena of concern” (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004, p. 234), which is known as purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Through email, four university instructors known to the researcher and working at four different universities in the UAE were contacted and informed about the nature of the present study. The four instructors replied to the sent emails, showing a willingness to participate. Thus, like most qualitative research, the sample is small, but the information obtained is rich and deep (Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Rosalind & Rahim, 2014). The participants Mary, Tina, Lin and Sally were English instructors coming from different countries, the USA, Lebanon, Syria, and Pakistan, respectively. Mary and Tina are the researcher’s colleagues and teach in the English department. Lin is an alumnus from the same university where the researcher is pursuing her EdD, and Sally is also in her EdD cohort. Both teach English at different universities in the UAE. The participants’ ages range from 30 to 47. Their face-to-face teaching experience varies between 9 and 20 years, and they all had no prior online experience before the emergency shift to online teaching in April 2020.

3.1.1. Instrument

In the interpretative paradigm, the researcher employs naturalistic methods like asking participants open-ended questions to gain a profound understanding of the learning experience and not generalise the outcomes (Higgs et al., 2010; Trudi, 2010). Spolsky (2000) confirms that interviews can offer researchers the chance to “explore in conversation and through stories and anecdotes the attitudes, identities, and ideologies of (our) subjects” (p.162). In this study, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with four English instructors working in the UAE. The interviews were one-on-one and took around 45 min each. Even though 11 guiding questions were prepared (Appendix A), their format was open-ended, to allow new ideas and follow-up questions depending on the interviewer’s judgement. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview questions were developed carefully to answer the two parts of the research question in this study. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews took place through Zoom and were conducted in English, as the participants were highly proficient English instructors. These interviews were deep and rich, producing around 175 min of interview data.

3.1.2. Ethical considerations

Prior to doing research, the approval to conduct the study was sought from the University of Exeter. Participants were contacted and informed about the nature of the study and were assured that participation is voluntary. Their signatures on the informed consent forms were obtained and their freedom to participate, not participate or withdraw from this study at any time was highlighted. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were utilised to conceal the participants’ identity and the university names were unrevealed. The participants were assured that the recordings and transcripts would not be disclosed to any third party.

3.1.3. Data analysis

In qualitative studies like this research, the primary goal of the researcher is to identify patterns in their data to generate themes (Shank & Brown, 2007). Prior to the process of coding and analysing, the audio-recorded data were transcribed verbatim from interviews to achieve more accuracy, and the researcher got immersed in reading, re-reading, reflecting on and interpreting the raw data in the transcripts. Afterwards, the process of deductive and inductive coding started, and that entailed coding and categorising data. An inductive approach was mainly embraced because most of the themes, especially the ones related to teachers’ roles, emerged from the data as the related interview questions were open-ended. However, to enhance the understanding of meaning-making, some themes related to Beliefs about Teaching, Beliefs about Face-to-face Learning, and Beliefs about Online Teaching were deductively established. Throughout this process of thematic analysis, themes were generated from codes that were generated from subcodes, and this process was facilitated with the help of NVIVO. While reading the data, general themes were generated and refined later as related themes were grouped into a combined category. The data were analysed based on the research questions, which is an instrumental approach since “it draws together all the relevant data for the exact issue of concern to the researcher” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 1206).

4. Findings

The results presented in two different sections reflect the two parts of the research question. These sections explain the impact of the shift from face-to-face teaching on teachers’ beliefs of teaching and learning as well as its effect on teachers’ roles.

4.1. Teachers’ beliefs: from face-to-face to online teaching

4.1.1. Beliefs about teaching and the self

The four participants in this study expressed their love for teaching using expressions like “It is very gratifying”, “I love being with students in the classroom”, and “It offers me the chance to interact with students”. Despite disliking the assessment aspect of the job, they stressed how rewarding it is to see students develop and grow. Mary enjoys the fact that “teaching is something that never stands still... It’s a revolving door of people and personalities.”

When describing themselves as teachers, the participants seemed to tie their professional identities to their personal identities. Mary explained, “I have a very dry sense of humour, and I kind of take that to my class because it helps me function better.” Sally, who highlighted the importance of interpersonal relationships in her life said, “I am a fun, friendly teacher … I sit with my students, we talk together, laugh together, tell jokes and stories.” Lin, who described herself as a serious person and knowledgeable researcher, keen on attendance and discipline than hands-on activities, also reported that students see her as a strict professor. Tina, who viewed herself as an enthusiastic, interactive instructor, said her students have good relationships with her because of her young age.

4.1.2. Beliefs about face-to-face teaching

The participants expressed a strong preference for face-to-face teaching despite liking some features of the online class. To Mary, the face-to-face classroom “allows teachers to see in real-time a student’s reaction, interaction, comprehension or lack of comprehension of what you’re doing.” Sally also assured interpersonal relationships with students flourish in a face-to-face classroom where her jokes are easily understood. Tina considered the face-to-face class to be fun since “time passes quickly, as you can have some hands-on experience. You can connect to each one of them (students), you can see them properly, and read their facial expressions.”

4.1.3. Beliefs about online teaching

Although the four participants had a clear-cut preference for face-to-face teaching, three of them seemed to value some components of
the online classroom. Mary appreciated the fact that students are well-versed in technology and could use it effortlessly to obtain information. The shift online reminded her that teachers should stay up to date and reinforce their lessons and themselves, so she said, “If I am an educator, I must also be educated about the things my students are using and have access to.” Additionally, when on the online platform, she was able to multitask as she explained, “I was able to navigate several windows at one time. I could show certain videos, and we could have discussions.” According to Sally, who considers herself tech-savvy, “In the online classroom, students learn different skills like the 21st-century skills better… There are certain types of activities that are specifically designed for online learning using the technological tools, websites, and apps.” Lin liked the fact that “some shy students in the class were more active online and wrote more on discussion boards.” She also seemed to favour online teaching for some practical and personal motives like “just to avoid the troubles of being around people and driving back and forth.” Despite the challenges they faced online, two of the four participants realised some benefits. Mary said, “Going forward, I think I will consider what areas of the curriculum I would do face-to-face and which ones I would do virtually and add more blended learning as long as I could.” Lin stated, “It was an eye-opening experience, raising awareness to the fact that teaching can be done and can be effective online if you have the right tools, media, visuals to engage students.”

However, for all the participants, online teaching has led to some disruptions to their professional experience and urged them to develop new teaching practices and beliefs. They felt insecure and uncomfortable with the sudden shift online as they had no prior experience teaching remotely. For Lin, changing the medium was troubling as she described, “The first class was awful in terms of my fear. When I started speaking, and I was recording the session, my voice was shaking.” Mary also became aware of her teaching as she felt how exposed a teacher is in the virtual setting. She said, “I don’t know if a parent is sitting on a chair next to a student, or an administrator logged on.” Also, the participants felt they were not able to convey their real teaching persona online. Lin believed the online classroom rendered her powerless and deprived her of the authority she had in the physical setting. She said, “I felt powerless with some students because we don’t have access to see what they’re doing if they’re listening or not.”

4.1.4. The impact of the change on teachers’ beliefs

When asked about how this shift to online teaching affected their beliefs about teaching and learning, the participants agreed that their core beliefs stayed the same. According to Mary, “Despite technology and the access to it today, there are some students who benefit more from face-to-face teaching. I believe nothing is going ever to take the place of face-to-face interaction, not completely.” She further described, “There is so much more that goes in that 50 min lesson… teaching is a very complicated thing, and there is no one perfect way to do it, but online teaching is taking away the human interaction which is something fundamental.”

Sally also affirmed, “As a teacher, I believe every student deserves to learn, and I am there to help them whatever the mode is. I change practice and approach but not beliefs.” She, as well as Tina, highlighted the importance of face-to-face teaching and learning. Sally commented, “Students construct their knowledge socially and not in isolation… Unless you have that connection with students and hesitancies removed, then students feel comfortable, secure and learn better.” Lin viewed online teaching positively and said, “It taught me that teaching is not always straightforward and done in a classroom. Teaching can happen at any time and, in any place… You need to adjust and be flexible.” Despite the disruptions caused by the new mode of teaching, three out of the four instructors deemed themselves successful in achieving the objectives of the class online.

4.2. Teachers’ roles: from face-to-face to online teaching

Shifting online, the participants reported some changes in their teaching practices and roles due to the nature and requirements of the online classroom.

4.2.1. Pedagogical roles

When describing their roles in the physical classroom, the participants viewed themselves as facilitators of their students learning and not transmitters of knowledge. Mary explained, “I am just there to facilitate my students’ understanding.” Lin also concurred, “I don’t spoon-feed and like them to explore things… I facilitate learning, but at the same time, I guide them, I give them a lot of feedback.” The participants are supporters of student-centred classrooms where they play the role of the guide, and for Tina, “I give my students guidance on writing skills, but the workload all lies on them.” Shifting to the online platform, the participants claimed they continued to be facilitators but with different practices. Initially, they seemed to transfer everything verbatim from face-to-face to online. However, most of them realised it was a completely different scenario and became much more creative in the online classroom creating assignments and activities suitable for the online setting. Still, they missed the flexibility and immediacy they had in the face-to-face classroom as Mary expressed, “It was easier for me to be flexible… if you pay attention to your students, you realise when something is not clear… I can immediately change tactics.” However, in the online classroom, Mary felt “a little bit kind of rigid and not as comfortable and as fluid as the face-to-face classroom.” Despite still being facilitators online, Mary and Tina noticed they were sometimes spoon-feeding students online, as Mary stated, “I became more of a teacher online in the sense that whenever something didn’t make sense online, I felt more responsible I make sure I say it again and again. I was doing more handholding which was new to me.”

The participants agreed that the nature of feedback and assessment differed online. Mary confirmed timely feedback was difficult online and said, “In class, it is easy to walk around and give students immediate feedback on a sentence, idea or paragraph.” Tina added, “Everyone is there, and you can check their work on the spot… help them, give them hands-on comments and handouts.” Mary “spent double the amount of time assessing their work online because it’s one thing to assign the grade and also have the opportunity to explain to the student face-to-face what this means. It is something else to assign a grade by email.” Lin also noticed, “The responsibility of the students is different online. In the classroom, you can monitor their attendance, their work, you can give them a text to read, but when you give them an online text, here comes the autonomous learning.” Relatedly, Sally described the changes in the online assessment as “there are more open-book exams… students think critically and search the internet for materials, and they need to do things on their own like research work.”

Tina, additionally, seemed to be less of a guide online as she was not able to implement interactive activities efficiently due to the lack of training. She commented, “I made adjustments because in real life I used to… ask them to do some editing in groups and I will be there to guide them, but… I wasn’t able to turn it into an interactive teaching/learning process online.” Likewise, Sally had to replace her warm-up activities that involve students’ movements and interaction with online activities or elicitation questions, which are less personal and collaborative. Sally explained, “In class, I will put them in teams, and they would talk, discuss, debate, and laugh. Then they will write their essays. Now I cannot do that. Even if I divide them online, most LMSs don’t allow us to access the groups.”

Lin, who depended more on monitoring closely and giving handouts in physical contexts, noticed she had to make significant adjustments to her teaching style when online. She asserted, “Lecturing was not always viable online, and I had to depend on visual aids… Now I use more videos that were relevant to what we had. I also relied heavily on discussion boards in class.” In the same vein, while Mary used textbooks
as launching pads for class discussion and writing in the physical setting, she found herself using more technology online as having them watch videos, films, or documentaries before writing. Writing which was a daily practice in the physical classroom was mostly done towards the end of the week online as “it took more time to get them the information they need to write.” Mary felt “she became more creative, yet a lot more rigid online.”

4.2.3. Managerial roles

The participants found that they had to design the course for online delivery much more tightly than for the physical classroom setting. They expended much time collecting and organising materials, converting them into digital or other media formats and then posting them along with resources on the learning management system used. Mary said, “I spent a lot more time preparing for online teaching than I spent for face-to-face, easily double the amount.” Mary illustrated the highly structured and less fluid nature of online teaching and course management saying, “I had to have all my ducks in a row, the video ready, is the handout on blackboard, was the zoom setup well, was I recording, so sometimes I was too busy trying to get everything ready.”

Since students are expected to walk away from the online platform with the same amount of knowledge, a complete shift in everything was required, including lesson outlines, tools, activities, and assessment. When Mary moved to teach online, she made sure she had plans A, B, and C always ready. Lin felt pressured throughout the one hour and a half talking or working with her students on discussion boards to keep students busy as “silence in the online classroom meant you are not there.” She also felt she lost the authority and control she had in the face-to-face classroom as she commented, “Every time you un mute a student, you hear him speaking on the phone, eating or sleeping.” Most of the participants were also concerned about the integrity issues related to assessments. Tina exclaimed, “Even if they turn on their cameras, it’s still difficult to check if they are cheating. You can run the essay through a plagiarism detector site, but you cannot know if someone wrote it for them.”

Most participants complained about some administrative tasks they had to get involved in and complained about the inconvenience and extra workload they added. One example of this was recording sessions, as Sally mentioned, “In case you forget to record or have issues, you will be accountable for it.”

4.2.3. Social roles

The participants in this study reported changes in their social roles as they moved online, especially with non-verbal cues, closeness, and humour. In the face-to-face classroom, all participants seemed to have strong relationships with their students. They mentioned roles they played as a parent, counsellor, advisor, mentor and friend. Mary described her relationship with her students saying, “There are times when I had to put on a different hat and become an advisor or a cultural mentor.” Lin also described the strong bond she has with her students, “I feel we are connected as I always feel bad at the end of the semester when it is over, and they have to leave.” Tina’s students always confide in her about the problems they have and seek her advice.

However, the move online affected the interaction between students and their teacher and among students and their peers. Mary clarified, “Students struggled with interaction online, and I think I struggled as well trying to make it as realistic as possible for them. There is only so much you could do with a screen and a face.” All the participants believed that the online classroom missed the human interaction fundamental in teaching and learning. Sally was concerned building interpersonal relationships was not possible in the online setting as many students kept their cameras off. She said, “This makes me uncomfortable because it feels I am looking at a blank computer screen, and I am talking to myself or a wall.” Lin expressed the same saying, “We didn’t use the camera. I didn’t see them, and I tried to imagine their faces and would go to their profile to just have this perception of how they look like.”

Mary and Sally, who use humour and sarcasm in building relationships with their students, found it hard online. Sally felt her students could not understand her jokes as they did not see her facial expressions and gestures. According to Mary, “Things have to change even the way you are as a teacher has to change because some things do not translate well… You may have an intention with something you say, but it’s not going to align the same with every person.” Nevertheless, most of the participants tried their best to keep the human element and interaction alive using different ways. Sally, for instance, involved her students in various social media apps like WhatsApp, Jammer, and Teams and devoted two office hours daily to provide them with academic and affective support while Lin promoted more interaction through discussion boards. Still, despite being able to have interaction in class, Lin said, “The movement, the jokes, the spontaneity were missed online.” In addition to missing the spontaneity she had in the face-to-face class, Mary missed the sense of satisfaction and completion she experienced seeing her students develop and leave their physical classrooms at the end of the course.

5. Discussion

Technological initiatives, like the one experienced by the participants, frequently exemplify rapidly imposed change, altering the teaching setting and creating pressure on academic roles, practices, and identities (McNaughton & Billot, 2016). Because identity development is ongoing and contextualised (Churchman, 2006), the shift to online teaching undeniably affected the participants’ professional identity and caused a change in their teaching persona (Coppola et al., 2002). Their professional identity underwent some phases of instability as tensions arose between the way they viewed themselves, their beliefs, and their practices in the new context. In response to the ambiguity and challenges imposed by the new context, they adapted and adopted practices and roles, confirming that identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed depending on teachers’ career experiences (Korbonen & Törmä, 2014). The academics’ responsiveness to online teaching corresponded to their perception of the effectiveness of technology in offering ways of knowing, beliefs which are fundamental in teacher identity (Hammond, 2011).

The four academics had a clear-cut preference for face-to-face teaching; however, two of them valued the online experience and decided to integrate some of its elements in their physical classroom. The degree of their acceptance of online teaching seemed to be affected by the time of its adoption and appropriate professional learning support (Conole, 2010, as cited in Gerbic, 2011). Most of them complained about the inadequate training they received from their institutions, which exacerbated the challenges of the sudden shift and had an impact on their beliefs and perception of this new delivery mode. Most of them struggled with using technology effectively and felt like novice teachers; however, three of them realised online teaching got more manageable with time, and they gained more knowledge of new practices as they developed and applied them (Murphy & Manzanares, 2008).

In line with previous research, the participants highlighted the extensive planning and preparation and lack of flexibility while teaching online (Stacey & Wiesenberg, 2007). Most disturbances they had emerged from the absence of face-to-face contact and lack of student involvement. They asserted that face-to-face teaching had more chances for dynamic and hands-on instruction and better interpersonal connections (Stacey & Wiesenberg, 2007). Teachers whose students were not on camera could not depend on body language, visual signals and facial expressions that usually assisted in checking for comprehension, controlling attention, and establishing rapport and interaction (Murphy & Manzanares, 2008). Also, the spontaneous nature of student-teacher interaction was replaced by formal, planned interactions in the online classroom (Coppola et al., 2002). Some practices that relied on physical
presence were disrupted in the online context; thus, new ways of interactions were employed. These teachers also became more conscious of their teaching as they worried about the increased scrutiny and accountability of their online work.

The participants had different stances to change and various conflicting roles and identities that were not resolved but can create additional academic self-development, which lends support to McNaughten and Billot’s (2016) and Hanson’s (2009) findings. Despite the intense work, some considered the experience as rewarding as they gained practical knowledge and experienced some benefits first-hand. As in previous research, the participants in this study believed online learning could be as effective as face-to-face learning when it comes to learning outcomes, and most teachers acknowledged the promising future of the online teaching mode. Some voiced beliefs that the online modality made students more autonomous and teachers more facilitative and innovative (Stacey & Wiesenborn, 2007). Some felt gratified as they had to reconsider new teaching practices to engage learners and grateful for being able to learn more about a new mode of delivery.

In line with previous research, at the start of the change period, the participants kept on their routines and transferred them to the online context (Baran et al., 2011; Jonker et al., 2018; Stacey & Wiesenborn, 2007), a method referred to in the literature as “porting the classroom to the web” (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). However, in the absence of the physical presence in online courses, the participants had to change their approach, develop new competencies, and partake in different roles. During the development stage of the course, the teachers worked as designers setting the curriculum, gathering and arranging course materials, and designing teaching strategies (Anderson et al., 2001), all of which were considered part of the ‘managerial’ role (Berge, 1995, 2009; Coppola et al., 2002). During the delivery phase, teachers engaged with the students, teaching material, and technology. Most considered themselves as facilitators who employed online different cognitive/pedagogical tasks, affective/social tasks, and managerial tasks (Anderson et al., 2001; Berge, 1995, 2009; Coppola et al., 2002). The literature frequently refers to the non-online academic, the ‘sage on the stage’, as a fixed role and claims that some become facilitators and ‘guides on the side’ when they shift to teaching online. The findings revealed that the academics interviewed mostly assumed the role of a facilitator, whether in face-to-face or online contexts, nevertheless, had to use different facilitative practices suited to the online context.

6. Conclusion

Online education which has long been positioned at the periphery now has moved to central positions within university administrations (Forsyth, Pizzica, Laxton & Mahony, 2010), and this became more evident with the outbreak of COVID-19. With the urgent move online, university professors have faced major challenges due to a lack of knowledge required for online instruction. This knowledge encompasses pedagogical, technical and administrative expertise needed to create and facilitate effective online learning experiences (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Lourdes & Koole, 2020). Institutions are initiating change by developing distance learning courses and providing technical training to their staff yet paying little attention to the changes in professional roles and identities. Personal, professional and situated uncertainties can generate tensions in the emotional makeup of identity; therefore, teachers have to stay strong and get enough emotional support when faced with change so that stresses are controlled in ways that promote positive identities and lead to effectiveness (Day & Knight, 2008). Thus, online teacher preparation programs, universities and policy makers should ensure that instructors are well prepared for the shift in teaching roles as “the ways faculty members adapt to online teaching, and their new roles and skills define their successful transition to online teaching” (Baran & Correia, 2014). Therefore, ongoing research into teacher identities is a vital tool for promoting a better understanding of the teaching career and teachers’ roles in different contexts and different times. Further research should be conducted to investigate how teachers’ online experience might shape their future teaching and identities as well, especially as distance education is gaining more dominance.

This study has several limitations associated with its scope. In this study, only four English teachers were interviewed. Interviewing more participants teaching different subjects would have provided richer data. However, the credibility of this research was strengthened by data source triangulation (Patton, 2002), as the instructors interviewed belonged to four different higher education institutions, yielding better representativeness of teachers’ perspectives of their professional identity. Credibility was also strengthened through member checking or respondent validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After transcribing the interviews, I provided respondents with the chance to check their interview scripts to add extra information and correct factual mistakes to ensure the analysis’s appropriateness.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Appendix A

Interview questions

Name: ___________________ Date: ______________
Job title: ___________________ Teaching experience: ______________

1. Do you like teaching? What do you like about it? What do you dislike about it?
2. How would you describe yourself as a teacher? What do students say about you as a teacher?
3. Are you happy with your face-to-face teaching? Why, why not?
4. Do you like teaching online? Why/why not?
5. How does teaching online compare to teaching in the classroom? Describe any significant differences between what you believe about teaching face-to-face and what you believe about teaching online?
6. In what way did your teaching style/practices change? Describe any significant differences between what you do when teaching face-to-face and what you do when teaching online.
7. What adjustments did you have to make in your teaching to be able to teach online?
8. Do you think you are the same teacher online and in the classroom? Do you have the same roles in online contexts as in f2f ones?
9. Do you feel you succeeded in online teaching?
10. Will your online teaching experience affect your face to face one? How?
11. What did teaching online change in you as a teacher?

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