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# A Reflective Study of Online Faculty Teaching Experiences in Higher Education

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## **A Reflective Study of Online Faculty Teaching Experiences in Higher Education** **Katherine Perrotta, Mercer University, perrotta\_ka@mercer.edu** **Chara Haeussler Bohan, Georgia State University**

**Abstract:** Despite the popularity of online course and degree offerings in higher education, a lack of data persists on the unique challenges and opportunities online faculty face. Gaining insights about these experiences is important to ensure the quality of online teaching as colleges and universities continue expanding e-learning programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the online teaching experiences of two faculty members through the implementation of reflective study methods. Major findings show that faculty access to professional development and mentoring, isolation and connectedness to the campus community, and academic freedom and curriculum control have significant implications for online teaching and student learning. In the wake of COVID-19 as colleges across the nation suddenly are faced with moving to exclusively online learning, this study is needed more than ever.

**Keywords:** asynchronous learning, reflective study, faculty experiences, higher education, online teaching

As the demand for online courses and degree offerings in higher education continues to increase, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak, the need to examine the experiences of faculty persists. Despite the increase in the popularity of e-learning, the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) report, which measures faculty beliefs about engaged learning, revealed that none of its respondents taught online (2018, p. 5–8). Furthermore, Kimmel and Fairchild (2017) contend that “little is known about [online faculty] experiences” (p. 53). This lack of data is problematic as colleges and universities need to gain insights about the unique challenges and opportunities online faculty face as e-learning programs continue to expand (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Barr & Miller, 2013, p. 10; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Suleman & Gul, 2015).

### **Purpose of Study and Research Question**

Kimmel and Fairchild (2017) argue that there is an urgency for greater examination of the challenges online faculty encounter that include, but not are limited to, curriculum design, pedagogy, teaching evaluations, connectedness to the campus community, and professional development. The main question that frames this study is as follows:

How do the researchers’ experiences teaching online highlight professional challenges and opportunities for faculty considering transitioning to e-learning settings in higher education?

The first author taught over 30 sections of asynchronous online undergraduate survey history courses at three different institutions as a contingent faculty

member. The second author is tenured at a large university where she teaches face-to-face, hybrid, and asynchronous online graduate courses in education and political science. Combined, the authors have over 10 years of experience teaching asynchronous online courses in higher education institutions. The purpose of this study is to gain deeper understandings about the conditions the authors faced teaching online. The authors engaged in reflective study in order to determine how these conditions impacted their teaching effectiveness. Ultimately, teaching impacts student learning.

### **Literature on Advantages and Challenges of Online Teaching**

The following literature review highlights existing scholarship about the advantages and challenges of online instruction and the areas in which gaps exist with regard to how instructors' experiences impact the quality of e-learning and teaching. There are several challenges faculty may face when teaching online. One challenge involves resistance to teaching online courses. One major finding of the 2017 Educause survey of faculty information and technology found that "faculty have a love-hate relationship with online teaching and learning: They don't want to do it but think they would be better instructors if they did (Pomerantz & Brooks, 2017, p. 7). Additionally, only nine percent of 13,541 respondents to the Educause survey indicated that they prefer to teach online (Pomerantz & Brooks, 2017, p. 4, 25). The Pomerantz and Brooks study was conducted in 37 states and 7 countries.

There are several factors that contribute to faculty hesitance about teaching online. According to Barr and Miller (2013), some instructors "find it challenging to adjust [to a] new pedagogical form" (p. 12). Schmidt et al. (2016) highlight that since college instructors often teach as they were taught, they may lack an example of what effective online teaching entails, especially if they never took an online course themselves as students. Faculty may be required to switch from teacher-centered lectures that tend to dominate face-to-face teaching. Examples of the shift from lectures to student-centered instructional methods include interactive and engaged lesson implementation via discussion board assignments, digital simulations and other instructional tools, and synchronous or asynchronous webinars. As a result, instructors who are more familiar with teacher-centered methods may experience challenges transitioning to online instruction that emphasize implementation of student-centered pedagogies (Alexiou-Ray & Bentley, 2015; Gregory & Salmon, 2013).

Assumptions about e-learning may also contribute to challenges faculty face when teaching online. Bart (2010) and McQuiggan (2012) note that prevailing suppositions regarding online instruction include the perceived easiness of teaching in a digital setting. Moreover, McCormack (2015) and the 2017 Educause faculty survey found that a majority of faculty who did not teach online "strongly disagreed that online learning helps students learn more effectively" (Pomerantz & Brooks, 2017, p. 25). Given that the majority of faculty surveyed had unfavorable opinions of online teaching, these results highlight the need for wider distribution of scholarly data on online student learning, as well as examples of well-designed courses, in order to improve the quality of online pedagogy and instruction

(Blumenstyk, 2016; Kebritchi et al., 2017; Pomerantz & Brooks, 2017; Sibley & Whitaker, 2015).

Despite the challenges of teaching online, college and university instructors who engage in e-learning instruction may experience significant benefits. First, Shea et al. (2001) and Skibba (2011) found that online faculty tend to engage in greater self-reflection than face-to-face instructors. By providing frequent, timely, and constructive feedback on students' assignments and interactive communicative features such as discussion boards, online faculty can simultaneously reflect upon their instructional techniques and curricular design (Neuman et al., 2017; Alexiou-Ray & Bentley, 2015). As a result, increased reflective thinking may lead to greater instructor engagement in teaching and learning, professional success, and academic curiosity.

Second, online teaching affords faculty several incentives concerning time and money. For instance, Shea (2007) found that many faculty, particularly contingent faculty and women instructors, teach online due to the convenience this mode of instruction can provide when taking care of personal and professional commitments, especially if these courses involve asynchronous methods. Moreover, Sibley and Whitaker (2015) contend that some higher education institutions combat resistance to teaching online by offering financial incentives, such as paid professional development and extra funds to teach online courses, to attract more online instructors. As a result, faculty may receive intrinsic rewards, such as greater schedule flexibility, and extrinsic rewards, such as financial compensation, when they transition to teaching in the online classroom.

### **Ecological Theoretical Framework**

The authors used an ecological theoretical framework to shape this reflective study. Tinkler and Tinkler (2019) state that an ecological framework in educational research can "forge systems to promote justice, a justice sustained through care, curiosity, and humility" (p. 62). Dinkelman (2003) contends that the roots of an ecological perspective in reflective education research can be traced to John Dewey's scholarship "on the nature of thinking, problem solving, democracy, and educative growth" (p. 8). Dewey's works, specifically *How We Think* (1933), *Experience and Education* (1938), and *Democracy in Education* (1944) lay the groundwork for reflection as a "rigorous and systematic" research method because the practitioner must 1) describe observations from an experience in detail, 2) analyze the experiences to generate theories, and 3) test theories about experiences through interactions between one's self, others, and environment (Rodgers, 2002, p. 863).

The scholarship of Elliot Eisner and Bruce Uhrmacher also provide strong theoretical underpinnings for the significance of an ecological framework in reflective educational studies. According to Uhrmacher (1997), the implementation of an ecological framework allows researchers and practitioners to explore how "new ideas and practices affects extant ones" (p. 74). Furthermore, Eisner (1998) contends that examination of teachers' experiences within an ecological framework

“can expand our conception of human cognition and help us develop new forms of pedagogical practice” (p. 245). Drawing upon these works, Harvey et al. (2016) developed a theoretical framework for the ecology of reflection constituted from the following assumptions:

1. Reflection is a process that supports learning
2. Reflection may be engaged with at different levels, for different purposes, and from different perspectives
3. Connections exist between critical reflection and the higher order of cognitive processes of self-regulation and metacognition
4. Reflection includes many contexts and applications in teaching and learning
5. Reflective skills can be developed through strategic interventions and scaffolding
6. Reflection on experience provides a link to praxis (pp. 5–9).

With these assumptions in mind, Harvey et al. (2016) provide a model of three different ecologies that align with the theory of the ecology of reflection. These ecologies are 1) the learner, 2) the learning ecology, and 3) the experiential-learning ecology (p. 14). The authors used the experiential-learning ecology model for this study because they examined the online environments at four higher educational institutions to evaluate the challenges and opportunities they faced in the context of the policies, histories, populations, and culture of these unique colleges and universities.

### **Methodology, Data Collection, and Analysis**

Reflective study methodology was conducted for this research. According to Goodrick (2014), reflective methodology “involves the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences, and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal” (p. 1). Andrew et al. (2016) state that reflective methods are “the process of reflection and inquiry [that] can prompt faculty to question and change their pedagogies in ways that enhance student learning” (p. 291). The authors implemented this methodology in order to examine how the challenges and opportunities they faced teaching online could contribute to the growing body of scholarship on e-learning instruction in higher education.

Several data collection techniques were employed for this study. According to Silverman and Marvasti (2008), examples of data that can be analyzed in reflective studies include artifacts that record what people do, say, produce, or write. The authors collected 1) university guidelines for online instruction, 2) personal reflective observations, 3) supervisory evaluations, and 4) student evaluations and feedback. The authors manually coded the documents and determined emergent themes in order to identify areas in which experiences aligned with the theoretical framework. Next, the authors implemented Samaras’ (2011) five key characteristics for effective reflective educational research to analyze the data. These characteristics include 1) a personal situation inquiry; 2) critical collaborative

inquiry; 3) improved learning; 4) a transparent and systematic research process; and 5) knowledge generation and presentation. The authors applied Samaras' criteria by examining the context of the institutions where they taught and collaborating on data analysis to determine significant trends or themes from their reflective and other qualitative data. In addition, they also identified areas in which they experienced challenges and advantages teaching online and examined the type of professional development that was offered by their institutions to support online instruction.

### **Study Participants**

The first author taught over 30 asynchronous online undergraduate history survey courses as a contingent faculty member at three different higher education institutions over the course of ten years. She began teaching online courses due to her interest in e-learning instructional technology and pedagogy and to meet her teaching load. Additionally, she taught online courses because of the flexibility this kind of instruction provided while she pursued her doctoral degree and cared for a young child. Munro (2011) attributes people in the millennial generation to be born after 1980. Although the first author is considered to be a part of the "Millennial Generation," she never took an online course during her undergraduate and graduate studies.

The second author is a full professor with twenty-five years of experience teaching multiple social studies education, educational policy, and educational history courses at universities in the Southwest and Southeast. Recently, she facilitated asynchronous online courses for political science graduate students to meet her teaching load. She did not take online courses during her undergraduate or graduate studies. Unlike the first author, the second author was reluctant to teach online. However, as enrollments declined, the university pressured colleges and departments to expand online course offerings and programs.

### **Study Settings**

College A was a two-year college located in a metropolitan region of the Southeast that at the time of this study enrolled over 20,000 students. Since conducting this study, College A merged with a larger state university where the enrollment is over 50,000 students. Students at College A included traditional and non-traditional students, international students, and veterans. The first author was responsible for using the learning management system (LMS) to develop and implement course curriculum that included the syllabi, course content, assignments, and exams. College A used Blackboard and Desire2Learn (D2L) to teach online courses.

College B is a non-profit private university located in a suburban area in the Northeast. The student body was comprised of traditional and non-traditional students and active military personnel. Terrestrial campus enrollment is over 3,000 students. The online campus enrollment is over 100,000 students. The online courses were content enhanced, meaning an instructional design team created the course curricula that included the syllabus, discussion board questions, grading

rubrics, and research projects posted on the Blackboard LMS. The first author was expected to facilitate the provided curriculum and follow the college's policies with regard to accepting late or missing work and grading assignments.

College C was a public four-year institution located in a metropolitan region of the Southeast that enrolls over 30,000 students. The first author participated in a semester-long professional development course on the D2L LMS, which focused on online course design, curriculum development, assessment, and aligning assignments to learning outcomes. Furthermore, the author's newly created course was peer reviewed before the first author was certified by the college to teach online. Similar to College A, instructors designed all assignments, assessments, and course curricula while adhering to the criterion of the institution's rubric for an online course.

College D is a large public university located in a metropolitan region of the Southeast with over 50,000 students enrolled. The second author has been a tenured education professor at College D for over a decade. Formal professional development completion was not required for faculty to teach online. However, the author did obtain assistance from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). College D used the D2L LMS for online and hybrid course instruction.

### **Findings**

Several themes emerged from the authors' reflections about the advantages and challenges of teaching online courses. All four institutions placed a similar emphasis on 1) maintaining student retention, 2) meeting learning outcomes, and 3) providing rigorous instruction. These schools, however, possessed different policies concerning curricular goals and pedagogy, academic freedom, and faculty evaluation. Analysis of these experiences highlight important perspectives with regard to the challenges and opportunities faculty may face when teaching online.

#### **Academic Freedom and Curriculum Control**

The authors enjoyed considerable latitude designing the curriculum, assessments, and instructional materials while teaching online at Colleges A, C, and D. Both designed the course syllabus and schedule with respect to when readings and assignments were due. They used a variety of resources to differentiate instruction in the e-learning environment. Some of these materials included supplementary documentaries and informational videos on educational sites such as [www.ted.org](http://www.ted.org) and [www.learner.org](http://www.learner.org) to supplement course readings, recorded lectures on course readings, and Power Point presentations with narrations and images that outlined major points from the course textbooks. Institutional expectations of academic freedom were drastically different at College B. Faculty were required to administer the assignments and policies that were provided by the university. Several assignments were mandated for students to complete at College B, including weekly responses to discussion board questions with textbook citations and replies to classmates' posts. Additionally, weekly multiple-choice quizzes were embedded

in the electronic textbook. College B's policy mandated that students be allowed to re-take the quizzes in order to allow them to review incorrect answers to improve comprehension of content (Johnson & Kiviniemi, 2009). Students were also required to write a research paper from a list of pre-approved topics and pre-approved sources to reference.

Obviously, the first author saved substantial time not having to prepare the assignments, rubrics, and instructional resources at College B. Although maintaining standardization for assessments was crucial for College B to monitor student progress, the first author found that not being able to develop course content or establish course policies was extremely challenging to negotiate. As a result, the lack of flexibility to create curriculum, grade assignments at instructor discretion, and instill individual policies with regard to completing late work was difficult for the first author to manage and address.

### **Faculty Mentoring and Evaluation**

Colleges A, B, C, and D differed greatly with regard to faculty mentorship and departmental evaluation. According to Vaill and Testori (2012), "mentoring is a vital part of online faculty development process" (p. 116). The first author was never formally observed or evaluated by a departmental supervisor as an online teacher at College A and C. However, she received high scores by meeting all essential criterion for evaluation on her peer-reviewed course at College C, which certified her to teach online. The second author was not formally evaluated by peers for her online courses at College D. Both authors received formal student evaluations in all courses. Two themes emerged from these student evaluations during the authors' reflections about teaching online. These themes included promoting stronger student engagement and producing better videos. The first author received several evaluations from students who recommended "tweaks" to the videos, including the use of special effects and a "pseudo script" to make the content clearer and more "enjoyable" (Field Notes, December 12, 2018). In the student evaluations of the second author, 12.5% strongly disagreed, whereas 33.3% agreed and 50.0% strongly agreed that the lecture videos were helpful (Student evaluations, September 21, 2018). Furthermore, students recommended that the second author make the discussion board assignments more interactive, noting that at times these assignments "felt contrived and inauthentic" (Field Notes, August 1, 2018). Another student noted in the comments section of the evaluation that the discussion threads were not as engaging as hoped (Student evaluations, September 21, 2018).

Lloyd et al. (2012) state that mentoring is a key factor in effective online teaching, particularly with regard to fostering student engagement in the e-learning environment. Because departmental feedback was not available, both authors sought other resources such as attending conferences and collaborating with each other in order to improve their instructional skills in their online classrooms. When meeting together, both authors would ask questions about each other's experiences, which prompted further reflection about online teaching. In addition, the second author came later to online teaching as compared to the first author,



and thus found that the mentor-protégé relationship became reciprocal as both discussed common advantages and challenges related to online teaching.

College B provided considerable administrative oversight of faculty teaching and evaluation. Online instructors were part of a team with other faculty who worked under the directorship of one mentor. The mentors posted templates for email messages to send to struggling students and to use for feedback on assignments. They also facilitated discussion boards on pedagogy and shared digital resources for instructors to access on their LMS site. Overall, the first author found working with the mentors at College B to be a beneficial experience. For example, one mentor noted on the first author's midpoint evaluation that she observed her "attending to student needs, providing excellent resources and extra content, and giving students constructive and helpful feedback" (Field Notes, September 14, 2016). The mentors usually responded to questions about the course, grading, and other concerns in a very timely manner. Hence, they helped instructors remain engaged with colleagues and improve instructional and student outreach techniques.

Although mentors used a standard rubric to evaluate online instructors, faculty evaluation at College B was highly subjective. The first author was assigned to over a dozen different teams, hence working with different faculty mentors each term she taught. As a result, the feedback she received was inconsistent. For instance, one mentor commented that the frequency and content of her announcements were "exemplary" (Field Notes, January 2, 2015). The following term, a different faculty mentor noted that she posted too many announcements each week (Field Notes, March 3, 2015). Consequently, the lack of consistency with regard to how the first author was evaluated at College B became a significant challenge. Of course, faculty evaluations can be inconsistent in a face-to-face setting. However, because faculty at College B lacked autonomy over the curriculum, the first author was not always able to correct issues noted on mentor evaluations.

### **Professional Development**

Both authors found that attending professional development opportunities about 1) online pedagogy, 2) instructional design, and 3) the use of web-conferencing tools like Skype to increase faculty social presence in the online classroom to be extremely beneficial. Aust et al. (2015) note that "the success of any faculty training program hinges on creating a program that effectively delivers appropriate content in a supportive environment" (p. 13). The first author participated in professional development at Colleges A, B, and C. College A's CETL offered periodic "best practices" workshops that faculty could attend. The first author presented a workshop about promoting engaged learning in online survey history courses. She also presented data on her implementation of discussion boards as a means to promote high impact practices at a faculty meeting at College C. The second author attended professional development opportunities at College D's CETL where she received more than 10 hours of guidance. Furthermore, additional support from a graduate research assistant was provided for her online political science course. College B offered online webinars as professional development opportunities with regard to using rubrics to assess assignments for online courses. The workshops

that the first author attended included topics such as assessment calibration and the effective use of rubrics for grading assignments.

The training for online teaching that the first author received at College C was the most rigorous as compared to the other colleges. The training was a semester-long course facilitated by faculty at the college who provided in-person workshops and detailed handbooks to implement instructional tools such as Panopto and Kaltura recording software and SoftChalk for designing interactive notes for online students. She was evaluated on the materials she created in a “sandbox” course shell using the college’s LMS where the instructors provided her comprehensive feedback on how to improve the design and implementation of her assignments for online students. College C’s CETL frequently conducted refresher workshops and various professional development sessions for faculty that the first author attended. The availability of these professional development opportunities encouraged both authors to pursue further professional and scholarly research pertaining to engaged learning and pedagogical effectiveness in the online academy.

### **Connectedness to the Campus Community and Isolation**

Faculty establishment of a strong social presence in the e-learning setting is extremely important in order to promote engaged teaching and learning. Among the conditions that promote a strong social presence in online classes include, but are not limited to, posting announcements and discussion board threads, hosting webinar sessions, and corresponding with students via email (Aragon, 2003; Plante & Asselin, 2014; Shea et al., 2001; Taverna et al., 2015). Both authors implemented these internet-based communications strategies in conjunction with opportunities to meet with online students in face-to-face settings in order to foster greater connectedness to the campus community and rapport with online students. For example, some online students attended a panel discussion the first author gave at a conference hosted at one of College A’s campuses. Furthermore, the first author organized field trips to historical sites for online students at College C to attend (Field Notes, April 2019; Field Notes, April 2016). The second author met with students during her office hours as well as off-campus at a coffee shop in order to discuss assignments and other course materials (Field Notes, June 2019). Neither of the authors visited the terrestrial campus of College B.

Although maintaining a vibrant social presence in e-learning environments is vital for effective teaching and learning, both authors found that teaching online can be isolating (Field Notes, July 2018; Field Notes, April 2016). Online instructors who do not have access to an on-campus office space may feel like an “outsider” from the academic community (Kezar & Sam, 2013). Feelings of isolation are important considerations that relate back to professional development and to dispelling assumptions about online teaching. Kebritchi et al. (2017) note that faculty may find that the online environment can be a “cold and distant” place for students and instructors (p. 18). The lack of regular in-person interactions with colleagues and students caused both authors to feel disconnected at times from their academic communities, especially since they both taught asynchronous online courses. Although Meyer (2004) notes that the disconnect between online faculty and the

terrestrial campus environment is not a new concern, the authors believe that the issue of isolation is a major tension that online faculty may face, which could impact instructional effectiveness and student learning.

### **Discussion**

The authors confronted different policies and expectations for teaching asynchronous online courses at Colleges A, B, C, and D. However, they found several themes across institutions that indicate analogous conditions that support best practices for teaching in e-learning environments. Having access to on-going professional development, maintaining academic control over curriculum, and receiving consistent teaching evaluations were major factors that created a positive experience for the researchers when teaching online. Isolation from campus meetings and activities, the inability to design curricula at one institution, and the confusion resulting from contradictory supervisory and student feedback posed significant challenges for the researchers when teaching asynchronously online.

Overall, their findings suggest that higher educational institutions should provide faculty with opportunities to design, implement, and revise curricula; to participate in campus gatherings to foster connectedness; and to engage in professional development to support the complexities of online teaching. Creating an interactive and engaging online environment is not necessarily intuitive for faculty, especially those who never engaged in learning in online environments. Institutions that provide such support to faculty ultimately will attain the goals of promoting teaching effectiveness and student learning in asynchronous environments.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

There are limitations to this study. Since reflective methods were implemented for this research, both authors' subjectivities impact how they interpreted the challenges and opportunities faced as online faculty. In order to make this study more credible, the first author initially sought guidance and consultation from the second author to assist with member checking the reflective data and with analyzing the benefits and drawbacks of teaching online. Both authors find that reflection coupled with mentorship and collaboration with colleagues is critical for improving online teaching and minimizing feelings of isolation. However, additional member checks with other online faculty or instructional designers, who were not acquainted with the authors, could strengthen the findings in this study.

Second, there are limitations with the use of student evaluations for supporting data on how the authors' experiences teaching online impacted student as well as faculty learning. While the intention of student evaluations is to improve teaching through reflection, McDonald (2019) notes that the validity of these evaluations is questionable due to the fact "students often respond subjectively based on how they perceive the instructor makes them feel as an individual and/or learner" (p. 7). Empirical studies by MacNell et al. (2015), Mitchell and Martin (2018), and Rosen (2017) found that students gave unfavorable evaluations to women faculty who taught identical online courses as male colleagues. Additionally, the American

Association of University Professors (AAUP) stresses that student evaluations of teachers should not be used for tenure and promotion purposes due to issues of bias concerning gender, perceptions of the ease of passing a class, and low submission rates (Lawrence, 2018). Since both authors are women, it is unclear as to whether the comments they received on their student evaluations were valid. However, these evaluations helped the authors ponder areas for improvement of their online course offerings.

With these limitations in mind, the authors recommend three items for future research on how reflective studies on faculty experiences can further contribute to improved pedagogy and learning outcomes with online courses at higher educational institutions. First, further scholarship about wise practices in professional development for online faculty should be pursued. Despite the prevalence of literature that highlights the importance of professional development for online faculty, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) *Online Learning at Public Universities* report found that only 37% of participating AASCU schools mandated pedagogical training for faculty in online settings (Magda, 2019, p. 7). The authors concur with Mandernach and Holbeck (2016) that further research is needed about whether professional development that focuses on course design and the facilitation of teaching quality can enhance the achievement of student learning outcomes.

Second, the authors suggest further studies on the impact of regular faculty mentorship and its effect on online instructional effectiveness. The AASCU report highlights that faculty evaluations by supervisors and peers “rarely occur” (Magda, 2019, p. 7). Vaill and Testori (2012) recommend that an experienced online instructor serve as guest observer to give feedback on course design for novice online instructors, especially given the controversies with using student evaluations of teaching. Frequent mentorship may provide new and experienced online faculty the support and guidance they need to engage in effective pedagogy and to receive reliable and constructive evaluative feedback for improvement. Such mentorship can promote excellence in teaching and enhance professional satisfaction (Magda, 2019).

Third, the matter of academic freedom while teaching online is a significant aspect of the faculty experience that the authors suggest requires future research. As more colleges expand their online degree programs, there are concerns as to whether faculty are becoming “content providers” instead of scholars engaged in teaching and learning (Kessler & Wall, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, continued scholarship on issues of autonomy with regard to designing and teaching curricula in online courses is needed to further explore the impact of academic freedom on teaching effectiveness, professional development, and faculty satisfaction in e-learning environments.

## Conclusion

Overall, both authors' online teaching experiences were positive, particularly with regard to professional development and faculty support for designing and teaching online content. However, significant challenges both authors faced included feelings of isolation from students and colleagues, inconsistent teaching evaluations, and varying degrees of academic freedom and curriculum control. Although these situations may be experienced by faculty in face-to-face environments, Harvey et al. (2016) "invite colleagues...in validating and further developing the theory [of the ecology of reflection]" in the online classroom (p. 14). The authors suggest that further reflective studies of online faculty experiences are needed, especially since the abrupt and massive shift to online teaching as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Faculty members' dramatic conversion to digital instruction may provide opportunities for large-scale studies that evaluate the unique challenges and benefits of online teaching. Given the sudden urgency for faculty to engage in online teaching in the wake of the coronavirus, reflection on the process is critically important. When the pandemic has receded, faculty need to be able to consider opportunities and challenges that resulted from this great online teaching experiment. Indeed, understanding online instructional effectiveness ultimately should advance the goal of enhancing student learning.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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