Research Identity Memo

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It is difficult to think of all of the educational experiences I have had relating to Online Learning. What I have the most difficulty doing is determining what the statute of limitations is for my own experience. Do I pull in experience as a learner or and focus specifically on my experiences as a teacher and designer in online learning? Or do I embrace my personal experiences as an online learner to get an idea of what my ideas and beliefs are? Additionally, how far back into my personal history of online learning do I go? I took hybrid classes that emulated online learning close to a decade ago, but what I feel and believe about those courses is so drastically different from who I am now. I believe that the best course of action is to focus specifically on my personal experiences as a Master's and Doctoral student, ignoring my experiences as an Undergrad because I have personally changed and evolved so much. I also need to make sure that I divide my experiences into two divergent categories, that of the online learner and that of the online teacher and designer. My project is specifically focusing on the communication between teacher and student in online learning, so I will have to carefully examine my history as it relates to the teacher in an online environment.

As an online learner, I have taken multiple courses as a Master's student, witnessing different models of online learning as well as different teaching styles. This is important because it affords me the opportunity to examine the strength and abilities of a teacher using different teaching styles and methods. Since my project revolves around the role of the teacher, it is beneficial that I have taken classes where the teacher operates in a 1:1 model as well as within an online classroom model, giving me the opportunity to examine teachers in different online settings. Additionally, I feel that as a classroom teacher, I am able to identify good teaching
practices and methods, and I am able to apply these beliefs to online learning environments. However, I am wary of my personal judgments and critiques because I know that I am not perfect as a teacher nor is there really any one right way to teach. I truly believe that I have been very lucky to have excellent online teachers, so when I think of online learning and what skilled teachers look like, I think back to my own experiences as a learner with a supportive and encouraging teacher who listened to and responded to my needs and challenges. Due to the supportive nature of my teachers, I have a positive and encouraging outlook on online learning, so I feel that I am always looking for the bright spot in online learning, which could potentially lead to ignoring negative information from other students.

As a Designer and Teacher in Online Learning, I feel that I have a preconceived notion of my study and the role that the teacher plays in the development of the online student. This belief is due in part to my close connection to online learning as well as the role I have played in creating online learning opportunities. I don't want to feel that what I have done has been a waste or a failure, so I believe very strongly in the possibilities online opportunities create for learners. I have helped to design a Master's and Certificate program for GMU that teaches teachers how to teach online, and I have a constant fear that I have not done enough or focused specifically on the wrong element of online teaching. Part of my drive to succeed in this study is so that I can verify what I have done in my own course. My hope is that my hard work is validated, but, if it should come to light that I have missed the mark in my design or need to improve the structure of my course, the results of my project will help me do that. In addition to my design experiences, I have taught at George Mason's Virtual High School as well as taught in the new program I helped design, giving me the unique opportunity to apply my teaching experiences in the traditional classroom to the online environment. This experience has allowed
me to ascertain the validity of many online teaching strategies described throughout my learning and design experiences while assessing the viability of my traditional classroom expertise and skills.

The focal point of my research study revolves around the role the online teacher plays and how they create and maintain the role of the expert in online learning. There is a wealth of research that reinforces the notion that the traditional classroom teacher presents and provides a position of expertise in lessons, allowing students to use that resource to develop a concrete understanding of difficult topics and concepts because of the support provided by the expert. However, in online learning there is little research to determine whether the role of expert is fulfilled by the online teacher and whether or not students perceive their teachers to be experts rather than graders and assignment givers.

As someone with both teacher and designing experience in online environments, I believe very strongly in the role an online instructor plays. I also believe that far too many teachers, whether they are currently working in the online environment or not, don't understand or believe in the strong role an online teacher plays. Far too frequently I hear how easy that job must be, how simple it is to teach online, and how little work you have to do. These interactions disgust me and anger me because of my close personal connection to online learning environments. I truly expect that what I find will validate my emotions and beliefs towards teachers that expect teaching online to be easy rather than a challenging and fulfilling opportunity to provide honest and deep conversation with students who need a guide and expert to help them learn and grow.

Due to my unique and dedicated position within the online learning community, I feel that I am in the ideal location to begin studying and examining the role of teachers in online
learning environments. As someone who has experienced online learning from multiple angles, that of the student, the teacher, and the designer, I am in able to determine whether challenges experienced by the student are related to the teacher, the student’s own attitude and perception, or the design and structure of the course. Finally, my experiences have required me to read and research a wealth of online learning sources, so I am already well versed in what the research says about online learning and what the online teacher should look like. This will be an excellent opportunity for me to assess what the online teacher does look like and how that compares to what little research does exist.

My biggest fear and disadvantage is my proximity to this topic. My beliefs and expectations for the value of online learning are so strong that I am worried it may affect my analysis and interpretations of interviews and observations within the project. What if I miss a core disconnect between the teacher and student because I involuntarily (or voluntarily) choose to ignore it because it may harm what I believe to be true about the online learning environment? My biggest asset will be my critical friends team and, more importantly, the close group of students that I have been working with for a number of years. Their experience in online learning is vastly different, providing them with a unique understanding of the online environment that may lie in opposition to mine, or at the very least, afford them a more critical eye of my analysis and interpretations. Working with this group will be essential to my success and overcoming any potential validity challenges.

As the group I am working with moves forward, we plan to extend our study and cross analyze each others’ data for our own interpretations, thus furthering the scope of the study and strengthening the validity of our findings as a team. I believe that this is an important step into the research that exists in online learning and teaching.