

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH

2024, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1 – 7

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.05.01.01>

Research Article

Teaching before, during, and after the pandemic: A collaborative autoethnography of college educators teaching service-learning courses

Raymond Allan G. Vergara^{1*}, Angelique Blasa-Cheng², Kimberly Christie S. Vergara³, Maricel Balatbat²

¹Department of Marketing and Advertising, De La Salle University – Manila, Manila 1004, Philippines

²Department of Management and Organization, De La Salle University – Manila, Manila 1004, Philippines

³School of Economics De La Salle University - Manila, Manila 1004 Philippines

Article history:

Submission December 2023

Revised January 2024

Accepted January 2024

*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

raymond.vergara@dlsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This is a collaborative autoethnographic account of two educators' experience teaching undergraduate students a course that integrates and activates service-learning principles before, during, and after the pandemic. It is a narrative of the circumstances and problems encountered, how they addressed these issues, and how they addressed problems, resolved issues, and improved learning outcomes. The study also discussed outcomes resulting from the steps they undertook and explored how they want to develop and enhance their courses moving forward. In discussing their experiences, they realized that the pandemic allowed them to reflect on their teaching philosophy and pedagogy, which led to improving their teaching practices. They believe that these improvements led to better learning outcomes. Furthermore, sharing experiences led to discussing unique perspectives on issues and problems, providing insight on how to solve problems, resolve issues, and improve learning outcomes.

Keywords: Collaborative autoethnography, Service learning

Introduction

The pandemic has impacted how educators teach service-learning courses. In the Philippines, the government's response to the pandemic forced learning to shift online, which constrained how service-learning courses engaged and interacted with communities and beneficiaries. Despite the initial worry brought

by uncertainty, educators used the pandemic as an opportunity to review teaching techniques and pedagogy and make changes to ensure that the course remains relevant, engaging, and meaningful.

Teaching during the pandemic spurred the review, re-evaluation, and revision of teaching practices. The initial reaction during the early

How to cite:

Vergara, R. A. G., Blasa-Cheng, A., Vergara, K. C. S., & Balatbat, M. (2024). Teaching before, during, and after the pandemic: A collaborative autoethnography of college educators teaching service-learning courses. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 5(1), 1 – 7. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.05.01.01

months was to understand how to shift from teaching within the four walls of the classroom to teaching within the four corners of the digital screen. The urgency of the need led educators to focus on short-term solutions. However, as the pandemic progressed, educators focused more on long-term solutions, particularly on incorporating the advantages of online and hybrid learning modalities. The pandemic also provided opportunities for educators to explore how to improve their pedagogical approaches to support learning engagement and success.

This study shares first-hand experiences of two educators teaching a class that integrates and activates service-learning principles before, during, and after the pandemic. The educators reflect on the circumstances, issues, and problems encountered, whether these are observed while teaching the course or resulted from circumstances surrounding the pandemic. More importantly, they discuss how these circumstances, issues, and problems were addressed and the resulting outcomes. The sharing of teaching and learning experiences leads to learning and drives pedagogical development, which contributes to theory development and enhanced practice inside and outside the classroom.

Why a collaborative autoethnography?

The goal of research is to help understand observed phenomena through data. Personal experiences are also data. When a researcher reflects on this experience or conducts self-reflexivity, the result is a discourse that helps expand understanding of social phenomena (Chang, 2013). Autoethnography may lead to transforming mindsets and perspectives, aided by the recollection, re-evaluation, and reflection of past experiences (Qutoshi, 2015). While experiences differ and may not be generalized for a large part of the population, reflecting on experiences helps make meaning (Change, 2013; Ellis, 2009). They are also likely to stimulate researchers to think further by triggering reflection (Barley & Southcott, 2019) or finding inspiration for future research (Change, 2013).

Despite the value of autoethnographies in research, there remain criticisms. Autoethnographic accounts tend to lack rigor, weak or

sensationalist, or even self-indulgent, leading to questions on its contribution to theory development or enhancing practice (Lapadat, 2017). These issues, however, are addressed by doing a collaborative autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017). A collaborative autoethnography is a study that involves two or more researchers sharing similar experiences to study social phenomena (Chang, 2013). Collaboration leads to the discussion of different perspectives, allowing researchers to reflect on and share their experiences with others and encouraging others to ask questions that deepen the reflection, resulting in a rigorous and multidisciplinary discourse (Hernandez et al., 2017; Lapadat, 2017).

Autoethnographies have become popular research tools for academics and educators. Some used this method to share and reflect on their experiences earning their PhDs (McPhail-Bell & Redman-MacLaren, 2019). Others see autoethnographies as a professional development tool for early career educators (Yung, 2020). Still others use autoethnographics to make sense of their teaching experiences during the pandemic (Loo, 2023; Utoft, 2020). Autoethnographies may help educators understand underlying motivations and causes of their behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and values, which impact their teaching (Barley & Southcott, 2019). During the pandemic, educators made use of collaborative autoethnographies to make sense of their experiences, share the challenges they faced, and how they overcame these challenges (Godber & Atkins, 2021; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Nachatar Singh & Chowdhury, 2021). Roy and Uekusa (2020) contend that pandemic-related narratives were rich qualitative data sources to help understand social phenomena experienced during an unprecedented time. More specifically, for service-learning courses, autoethnography may be used to develop deep learning competencies (Segu Odriozola, 2023) and a critical communication pedagogical approach (Kahl, 2010).

Methodology

This autoethnographic account critically reflects two educators' experience teaching a service-learning course. The research team members collectively decided to formalize what they consider an informal learning circle into a

published collaborative autoethnography. Beginning in the first year of the pandemic, the educators would casually share stories from their respective classrooms, specifically strategies that worked for them. One educator, Anj, teaches a service-learning course in corporate social responsibility and governance. Autoethnographies provide a platform for educators to share relevant experiences to help develop theory and enhance practice. Mond, on the other hand, teaches marketing events and advertising events that integrate service-learning principles. Kim, the third author, is a researcher and writer of autoethnographies. Anj, Mond, and Kim worked together to explore and discuss Anj's and Mond's experiences that form the data for this study, similar to the methodology used in Barley and Southcott (2019).

The reflection is also a retrospective introspection based on memory and a legitimate methodology of writing and discussing an autoethnographic account (Rod, 2011). In transformative learning theory, reflection is an essential step, and Qutoshi (2015) encourages educators to embrace autoethnography as it is one of the most suitable spaces for transformative educators and researchers to foster transformative learning. Collaborative autoethnographies serve as opportunities to reflect on assumptions and practices that are mutually beneficial and empowering for educators who share their experiences (Godber & Atkins, 2021). Furthermore, just as educator characteristics, disposition, and teaching styles impact student learning (Kirillova & Au, 2020; Rong-Da Liang, 2021), an educator's autoethnography benefits students, too.

This collaborative autoethnography addressed some of the criticisms and challenges raised about individual and collective autoethnographies. Very few logistical challenges were experienced. Everyone taught in the same university, and video conferencing provided an excellent alternative to in-person meetings. Very few relational challenges were also shared, as relationships were established before the research through the informal learning circle. Lastly, the researchers felt that there were very few ethical considerations for the study as it focused on examining issues faced in the classroom and how they were addressed (Lapadat,

2017). The educators also concentrated on their personal experiences, leaving out students from their accounts.

The educator experience explored in this study focused on these three main questions:

1. What circumstances, issues, or problems did I encounter in teaching the course?
2. How did the pandemic impact my teaching?
3. How did I resolve the circumstances, issues, or problems I observed?

Discussion

Anj's story

Anj teaches a course in corporate social responsibility and governance. It is a service-learning course conducted in partnership with the Center for Social Action and Concern (COSCA), the social development arm of De La Salle University. The unit is responsible for leading, advancing, and overseeing the promotion of the Lasallian Social Development (LSD) principles and the social formation values outlined in the Lasallian Guiding Principles. This involves ensuring a comprehensive understanding and embodiment of these principles among all University community members, as well as actively participating in initiatives that translate faith into action through dedicated service and solidarity with marginalized communities. In service learning, COSCA supports the faculty and the students in incorporating these principles into the academic programs. It aids through coordination and orientation, linking partner communities, and evaluation of service-learning projects.

The course is a requisite for all students enrolled in the College of Business and is typically attended by students in their second and third year in college. This is also offered to first-year students. Anj observes that there is significant observation of maturity in projects when provided to older students. Students who enroll in a class come from different fields of specialization within the College of Business: business management, marketing, accountancy, applied corporate management, and similar.

The learning objective of the class is to develop an understanding of the pressing global issues of social responsibility, sustainable development, and corporate governance. The principles learned from such contexts are to be

applied to a service-learning project, which can address the observed needs of the partner marginalized community. Projects can include advocacy activities, training and seminars, donation drives, etc.

In the course, students are expected to propose solutions to dilemmas and observed needs of the community that are reasonably sound and in line with sustainable development goals and ethical principles. These solutions must be communicated effectively through presentations and interactions with university stakeholders such as partner organizations and DLSU organizations. These project/s facilitate sustainable development goals that align with the University's mission vision.

COSCA selects the partner community/organization. These partners undergo orientation and sometimes training to make them aware of the objectives of the University, policies, and their roles in the curriculum.

Anj started teaching the course in 2018. She noticed the course was packed with numerous lectures. Her focus was on delivering the lectures and grading student requirements rather than guiding students with their capstone project. Furthermore, she found that some/many of the lectures needed to be more relevant. She also found that her students felt that the workload was heavy because aside from the service-learning project, they also turned in case assignments almost weekly and a weekly reflection paper.

The general feedback of her students was that they needed help to see the relevance of the course's subject matter to their field of specialization. Students often compared the course to another with a similar learning outcome. The problem stemmed from having too many activities, which left no time for students to reflect on how taking the course connects with their field of specialization. Furthermore, students conceptualize their projects in a rush, choosing to find what is easy and convenient, affecting how they think about how the course relates to their specialization.

Anj's initial concern was shifting to an online distance learning modality. The modality limits how the students can engage with their partner communities and the types of projects that they can implement. However, the

pandemic allowed Anj to update the lectures and review the service-learning process. The review led to a shift in the pedagogical approach, explicitly reducing the number of course requirements and lectures and focusing on the service-learning project instead.

She updated the lectures and reading materials that students use in the course. She reduced the number of weeks spent delivering lectures from the original 12-14 weeks to 6 weeks. The remaining weeks were spent on consultations with each project group. Students spent more time working on their projects. Reducing the lectures meant focusing on the most relevant and salient topics. She also reduced the number of assessments. She worked on striking a balance to ensure that students develop a foundation for the subject through lectures and assessments while providing enough resources, particularly time so that students deliver quality projects that are aligned with the lessons.

Anj observed that after the pedagogical shift, students were more likely to find a connection between the course and their field of specialization. They are beginning to understand the usefulness and relevance of the course in their learning and development. However, Anj still feels that students need to appreciate the full responsibility of business and professionals to society. So, her step is to develop her pedagogical approach so that students broaden and deepen their understanding of corporate social responsibility and governance.

Mond's story

Mond teaches marketing events and advertising events. This experiential learning course allows students to learn how to conceptualize, organize, and activate events that incorporate service-learning principles. The course is an elective that marketing and advertising students may opt to take. The learning objective of the course is for students to develop an appreciation for events as a tool not only for marketing and advertising but also to help solve societal problems. The expected outcomes include two collaborative events projects: a classroom event and a final fundraising event project. The

fundraising project serves to benefit a vetted beneficiary.

Mond started teaching marketing events and advertising events in 2007. Initially, Mond focused on the marketing and advertising focus of events. In 2016, he shifted the focus of the class and included a service-learning component through the final event project. He introduced a new concept, which he called the ripple effect. The ripple effect, put succinctly, promotes the value of doing good things for others, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem. However, even after introducing a service-learning component into the final event project, the primary focus was still on event activation, and the service-learning aspect was treated as a secondary focus.

Then, the pandemic struck in 2020. The issue with shifting to the online learning modality for events marketing was two-fold. First, he needed to shift the class to an online learning modality. Second, he needed to teach an events course relevant to the times. Most events had to be postponed or canceled in the first year of the pandemic due to social distancing measures imposed to respond to the pandemic. Many event organizers turned to activating online events.

The pandemic became an opportunity for Mond to reflect on his pedagogical approach. He considered the pandemic a disorienting dilemma, an opportunity to transform his perspectives, attitudes, and behavior relating to teaching and learning. Drawing from the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1978a, 1978b, 1991, 1996 & 1997) and operationalized by Slavich and Zimbardo (2012), Mond reimagined the online classroom and implemented changes to enhance student engagement. This led him to focus on delivering experiential lessons, which come in the form of storytelling lectures and collaborative challenged-based projects. He also used this opportunity to use this transformation to contribute to theory development and to enhance practice by integrating research in his classroom and publishing many of his findings (Vergara, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Vergara & Vergara, 2023a, 2023b).

The pandemic also became an opportunity for Mond to shift how he views events marketing, particularly on how it may be used as a tool

to contribute to resolving societal issues. The pandemic struck during the middle of the term, and Mond's initial problem was finishing the term when all classes were forced to move online. However, he felt that this problem was inconsequential compared to the problems of others who were impacted negatively by the pandemic. Then he realized, why not use the events marketing class to help people affected by the pandemic? He shifted the final requirement and explained to the students how they could benefit through a collective project. What resulted was a collaborative project that raised valuable resources in the form of funds, medical PPEs, and food that helped medical and logistical frontliners during the early weeks of the pandemic.

The successful project provided an opportunity to rethink how the course could focus more on the final project's service-learning component. The class finals project shifted from event activation into an online fundraising campaign to help medical and logistical frontliners. Helping beneficiaries became the focus of the final project and the pedagogical shift during the pandemic. Mond observed that after shifting tact, students felt that the learning experience was fun and engaging and meaningful.

Conclusion and Implications

On responding to the pandemic. The pandemic provided an opportunity to reflect on teaching practices, review teaching approach and philosophy, and make necessary changes to address problems, resolve issues, and/or improve learning outcomes. In the transformative learning theory literature, the pandemic may serve as a disorienting dilemma, which provides an opportunity for reflection and transformation.

On making changes. Both educators agree that learning outcomes improved when changes were focused, specifically on the relevance of learning materials and project requirements. Both educators also agree that the reducing the time spent on lectures and increasing the time spent on project collaboration, including student-teacher consultations, resulted in improved learning outcomes. In Anj's case, students developed a greater

appreciate for the course, specifically their understanding the course's relevance to their field of specialization. In Mond's case, students found the learning experience fun, engaging, and meaningful, which lead to positive attitudes towards the course and learning in general.

On finding ways to improve. The research process on autoethnography, specifically the exchange and discussion of experiences, provided another opportunity to reflect on their teaching approach, learning principles, classroom management practices, and pedagogy. The educators identified similarities in their approach and the problems encountered.

While the pandemic provided an opportunity for reflection, the educators hold that there is an opportunity to reflect in every moment. Writing an autoethnography is another opportunity for reflection. Reflecting on one's learning philosophy and pedagogy may lead to changes in teaching practices and classroom management, significantly impacting learning outcomes. As such, this study encourages all educators to reflect and share their experiences to a broader audience to develop theory and enhance practice.

References

- Barley, K. D., & Southcott, J. (2019). Effecting epiphanous change in teacher practice: A teacher's autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(10), 2608-2624.
- Boyle, M. & Parry, K. (2007). Telling the whole story: The case for organizational autoethnography. *Culture and Organization*, 13(3): 185-190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759550701486480>
- Chang, H. (2013). Individual and collaborative autoethnography as method. *Handbook of autoethnography*, 107-122.
- Godber, K. A., & Atkins, D. R. (2021, July). COVID-19 impacts on teaching and learning: a collaborative autoethnography by two higher education lecturers. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 6, p. 647524). Frontiers Media SA. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.647524>
- Guy, B., & Arthur, B. (2020). Academic motherhood during COVID-19: Navigating our dual roles as educators and mothers. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(5), 887-899. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12493>
- Kahl Jr, D. H. (2010). Connecting autoethnography with service learning: A critical communication pedagogical approach. *Communication Teacher*, 24(4), 221-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17404622.2010.513036>
- Kirillova, K., & Au, W. C. (2020). How do tourism and hospitality students find the path to research?. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, 20(4), 284-307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2020.1713965>
- Lapadat, J. C. (2017). Ethics in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(8), 589-603. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417704462>
- Loo, D. B. (2023). "It Feels Like a Performance When I Teach Online": Autoethnography of Tensions in Teacher Identity. *Profile Issues in Teachers Professional Development*, 25(2), 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v25n2.104914>
- McPhail-Bell, K., & Redman-MacLaren, M. (2019). A Co/Autoethnography of Peer Support and PhDs: Being, Doing, and Sharing in Academia. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(5), 1087.
- Mezirow, J (1978a). Education for Perspective Transformation. Women's Re-entry Programs in Community Colleges.
- Mezirow, J (1978b). Perspective transformation. *Adult education*, 28(2), 100-110.
- Mezirow J (1991) Transformative dimensions of adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J (1996). Contemporary paradigms of learning. *Adult education quarterly*. 46(3): 158-172.
- Mezirow J (1997) Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New directions for adult and continuing education*. 1997(74): 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369604600303>

- Nachatar Singh, J. K., & Chowdhury, H. A. (2021). Early-Career International Academics' Learning and Teaching Experiences during COVID-19 in Australia: A Collaborative Autoethnography. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 18(5), 12. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.18.5.12>
- Poole, A., & Bunnell, T. (2022). Precarious privilege in the time of pandemic: A hybrid (auto) ethnographic perspective on COVID-19 and international schooling in China. *British Educational Research Journal*, 48(5), 915-931. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3801>
- Qutoshi, S. B. (2015). Auto/ethnography: A transformative research paradigm. *Dhau-lagiri: Journal of Sociology & Anthropology*, 9, 161. <https://doi.org/10.3126/dsaj.v9i0.14027>
- Rod, M. (2011). Subjective personal introspection in action-oriented research. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 6(1), 6-25. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17465641111129362>
- Rong-Da Liang, A (2021) Examining the factors of experiential learning and teaching style: A case study of a hospitality and tourism program. *Journal of hospitality, leisure, sport & tourism education* 29. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2021.10.0332>
- Segú Odriozola, M. I. (2023). Autoethnography as a Tool for the Achievement of Deep Learning of University Students in Service-Learning Experiences. *Social Sciences*, 12(7), 395. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12070395>
- Slavich GM, Zimbardo PG (2012) Transformational teaching: Theoretical underpinnings, basic principles, and core methods. *Educational Psychology Review*. 24(4): 569-608. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-012-9199-6>
- Utoft, E. H. (2020). 'All the single ladies' as the ideal academic during times of COVID-19?. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(5), 778-787. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12478>
- Vergara, R.A.G. (2022). Delivering A Transformational Learning Experience Online. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 3 (12), 2726-2737. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.03.12.24>
- Vergara, R.A.G. (2023a). Transformative learning in the online classroom: A marketing educator's autoethnographic account. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 4(7), 2444-2451. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.04.07.24>
- Vergara, R.A.G. (2023b). The value of experiential lessons in event marketing education. *Philippine Academy of Management E-Journal*, 6(2), 66-75.
- Vergara, R.A.G., & Vergara, K.C.S (2023a). Learning Co-Creation and Self-Determination: Lessons from Teaching Event Marketing. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 4(7), 2566- 2573. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.04.07.33>
- Vergara, R.A.G., & Vergara, K.C.S. (2023b). Storytelling in the Classroom: Why it Matters in Event Marketing Education. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*, 4(8), 2847-2852. <https://doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.04.08.22>
- Yung, K. W. H. (2020). Becoming a teacher educator through being a student teacher: an autoethnography in the practicum. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(2), 248-250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1724655>