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Virtually There: Distant Freshmen Blended in Classes through Synchronous Online Education

Phillip A. Olt¹

Abstract: Synchronous online education occurs when the students and faculty member are in different locations geographically and interaction occurs simultaneously through the internet at scheduled times. In this study I investigated the phenomenon of using synchronous online classes blended with a face-to-face classroom to complete the freshman year of college. The essence of the experience emerged around the concept of ambiguity, specifically in regard to group membership, functionality of technology, and place. This understanding of ambiguity provides a framework upon which to design practices for engaging such distance students and best promoting their learning.

Keywords: synchronous learning, online education, distance education, phenomenology

Distance education is delivered in many forms—from videotapes in the mail to MOOCs. The stereotypical online college class of today generally consists of pre-recorded instructional videos, textbook readings, assessment activities, and interaction in an asynchronous discussion forum. The methods of content delivery and interaction have evolved along with the technological revolution and with the expansion of high-speed internet and improved video conferencing

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technology. Institutions have now begun to expand their online offerings to include synchronous learning, which occurs when the learners and faculty member are geographically separated and their interaction occurs simultaneously at scheduled times. Examples include the University of Wyoming Outreach School (2017), which has fed more than 30 synchronous undergraduate and graduate classes to 59 sites, and the University of Texas Department of Psychology (2016), which began offering an introductory psychology course in 2013 to approximately 1,500 students with a small number physically present with the professors and the rest attending through synchronous online learning. Terming that a synchronous massive online course (SMOC), the University of Texas has expanded such offerings; and the University projects that such classes will be a key component of future education (University of Texas Department of Psychology, 2016). In a joint venture, Old Dominion University and George Mason University created a system of synchronous and asynchronous online coursework to complete degrees in various disciplines (Online Virginia Network, 2017). Adding to the conversation, Kim (2017) proclaimed on the higher education news site *Inside Higher Ed* that Zoom web conferencing software was the technology of the year for higher education as used for synchronous online learning.

My former institution, Maranatha Baptist University, began a synchronous online initiative in 2013. Called “Bridge to Campus,” the program provided the entire freshman year of college through synchronous online coursework. Residential courses were broadcast live, and distance students viewed them and participated in real time through Zoom video-conferencing software. The students tended to be congregated at locations throughout the country where they worked together though those locations were unaffiliated with the institution.

A sense of dissatisfaction with gaps in the literature, and curiosity, led me to develop the

study reported here; and I sought to address the following phenomenological research question. What is the academic experience like for freshmen doing their first year of college through synchronous online education in classes blended with face-to-face students?

For the purposes of this study, I use the following terms and definitions

- “Online education”: instruction where the learner and faculty member are geographically separated and interaction is accomplished through the internet.
- “Asynchronous online education”: online education where interaction does not occur simultaneously or at scheduled times.
- “Synchronous online education”: online education where interaction does occur simultaneously at scheduled times.

Literature Review

In general within the academy, we use synchronous online education in a limited capacity to support either face-to-face or asynchronous online education. It may be used to blend a class with some meetings occurring face-to-face and others held synchronously online (Stewart, Harlow, & DeBacco, 2011). More commonly, synchronous elements are blended into otherwise asynchronous online courses. Synchronous online learning has been used effectively for small-group sessions involving graduate students (Akarasriworn & Ku, 2013), to bring in guest speakers (Pennell, Thakore, & West, 2015), and to support specific task or social needs in a course (Hrastinski, Keller, & Carlsson, 2010). Asynchronous and synchronous communication methods appeal to different student preferences (Krause, Portolese, & Bonner, 2017; Madden, Jones, & Childers, 2017) although synchronous online discussion has been found to increase higher order thinking skills more than do asynchronous discussion forums (Brierton, Wilson, Kistler, Flowers, & Jones, 2016).

Patching in synchronous experiences with asynchronous online education does, however, come with challenges. Acosto-Tello (2015) suggested that technical issues, limitations on preparation time, challenges with getting online students to engage, and scheduling serve as the primary challenges to synchronous online learning, even when only using synchronous sessions as a supplement to an asynchronous online course. Graduate nursing students, who were enrolled in otherwise asynchronous courses, described synchronous online education as enjoyable and providing geographic flexibility while increasing interaction although it suffered from more technological difficulties than did asynchronous online classes (Foronda & Lippincott, 2014).

There is, however, a much less developed body of research around synchronous online education than there is for asynchronous. The synchronous element has been found to provide greater perceived interaction (Francescucci & Foster, 2013; Gillies, 2008; Kuo, Walker, Belland, Schroder, & Kuo, 2014). Synchronous online education may indeed be an effective tool to promote learning gains as shown in studies by Evans, Sønderlund, & Tooley, 2014; Gillies, 2008; Politis & Politis, 2016; and Woodcock, Sisco, & Eady, 2015. Technological issues have, however, been most commonly noted as a limiting factor (Evans et al., 2014; Gillies, 2008; Pennell et al., 2015; Woodcock et al., 2015).

Little has been done to research synchronous online learning experiences like Bridge to Campus despite their growing popularity. Synchronous online education generally has been researched as a discrete learning environment with its own unique students, rather than blended with classroom students. Akarasriworn and Ku (2013) conducted a study with graduate students who sometimes met together face-to-face, but then at other times they met with some physically present while others tuned in from a distance; their perceptions of the experience were generally positive. One study suggested that there would be no drop in engagement if students took up to

half of their classes via synchronous online education (Francescucci & Foster, 2013), but the study did not provide research evidence to support that claim.

The Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand what the academic experience was like for freshmen doing their first year of college through synchronous online education in classes blended with face-to-face students. Move the next line up to here. This study was conducted during the fall of 2017 with the approval of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wyoming.

Framework Concepts and Methodology

I chose phenomenology as the methodology for this study because it seeks to answer the question of what this human experience is like (van, Manen, 2016, p. 350). Little is known about the experience of synchronous online education when blended with face-to-face classes, and the results of this study illuminate that experience. Phenomenological research in education is a “meaning-giving method of inquiry” (van Manen, 2016, p. 28). In Heidegger’s (1927/2008) exposition of *logos* as an etymological component of phenomenology, he described the task of the phenomenologist as one who “makes manifest what it [the phenomenon] is talking about, and thus makes this accessible to the other party” (p. 56). For that to be accomplished, Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes interpretation of phenomena regarding both nature and meaning.

In this study, I employed hermeneutic reduction, which was described by van Manen (2016) as follows: to bracket “all interpretation and explicating reflectively whatever assumptions seem to need attention in writing the research text” while overcoming “one’s subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations that may seduce or tempt

one to premature, wishful, or one-sided understandings of an experience that would prevent one from coming to terms with a phenomenon as it lived through” (p. 224). He further suggested the importance of setting aside frameworks and theories for a fresh and open approach to the data. I identified such pre-existing orientations and attempted to set them aside to the extent possible.

To that end, it is important that I place myself regarding the topic. My interest in synchronous online education arose from personal experience. At the institution under study, I managed the operations for Bridge to Campus for the first four years of its existence, while it continues today. During that time, I struggled to identify best practices and to understand whether the program was successful as an educational endeavor. Then as a research project, I conducted this study in partial fulfillment of course requirements for a research methods course taught by the University of Wyoming, which was delivered via synchronous online education. Despite my heavy involvement and contact with students doing Bridge to Campus in previous years, I really had no idea what to expect as the experience from the student side; and this study was motivated by my genuine desire to understand that better. Whether the results were glowingly positive or profoundly negative, I simply started this project as a quest for an understanding of this experience to inform my practice and that of others.

van Manen (2016) cast phenomenology as the essence of ontology itself—providing answers to questions of being. I have approached this study from the position of applied scientific ontology, wherein the existence of a conceptual reality is acknowledged (Jacquette, 2002). Borrowing from Stake (1995), the epistemological perspective from which I approached this study is that of a constructivist variant, which means there is a universal reality that is understood by people through their interpretations of experiences and then also through integration with the interpretations of others.

This study can also be situated within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in higher education. Boyer (1990) proposed the scholarship of teaching—later renamed SoTL—as shared scholarship to aid in the communication of knowledge to learners. Under this broad umbrella, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) proposed the Community of Inquiry model, wherein the immediacy of social, cognitive, and teaching presence by a faculty member with students was crucial to facilitate learning. Vaughn, Garrison, and Cleveland-Innes (2013) described that model as collaborative and constructivist. However, distance education broke the physical proximity necessary to fully engage such a model. This barrier led Themelis (2014) to propose the theory of teleproximity as an extension of the Community of Inquiry, wherein synchronous online education could be used to promote teacher presence, cognitive gains, and social engagement. This model was further developed through later collaboration (Themeli & Bougia, 2016). Thus, the computer-mediated presence of a faculty member is provided in synchronous online education more effectively than in the asynchronous learning format. This study contributes to the SoTL in higher education by illuminating the student experience in synchronous online education and the barriers that can prevent the full realization of the ideals of tele-proximity and a Community of Inquiry. Educators and administrators may then use this knowledge to improve the delivery of instruction and quality of learning in synchronous online education.

Sample

This study was conducted among students of the Bridge to Campus program at Maranatha Baptist University. I used purposeful sampling to select the participants, who were actively participating in the program during the semester of the study or who had been enrolled during the previous spring semester. There was a total of 21 possible participants, who were all invited

by email to participate in the study. Of the 21, nine volunteered as participants and signed informed consent forms.

In this report, I use pseudonyms for all participants and obscured their learning center locations. Four participants—Rob, Kelly, Pat, and Larissa—volunteered to provide a series of individual interviews. After these individual interviews were conducted, five other participants—Brittney, Sierra, Calvin, Diego, and Julie—volunteered to join Rob and Pat for a focus group session, which Kelly and Larissa were unable to join.

Procedures

I conducted loose, semi-structured individual interviews a focus group meeting with minimal structure, and class observations. Interviews lasting approximately one hour were conducted with the active Bridge to Campus students through the Zoom web conferencing software, and face-to-face interviews were conducted with those students who had participated in the previous year but had transitioned to campus. I conducted a focus group session with transitioned campus students and the Bridge to Campus students during their one campus visit. The focus group allowed me to dialogue with participants, and they could also interact with each other. To conduct observations, I watched one recording from each of the 15 synchronous online classes offered that semester and four additional class sessions from each class that was specifically mentioned by a participant during the interviews or focus group. The observations helped me understand the comments of the participants and see the situations they described in progress. The majority of the data collected was derived from individual interviews, and thus they are more heavily represented in this report than is the focus group session.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in this study following the three-level approach of van Manen's thematic

analysis for hermeneutic phenomenology (2016): a holistic reading, a selective reading to identify statements and phrases that are essential to understanding the phenomenon, and finally a detailed reading to look at each sentence or sentence cluster for what they reveal about the phenomenon. After finishing this process, I utilized my understanding of the phenomenon arrived at through the data to develop the themes that best described the experience of these students who had chosen to do their first year of college through an immersion into synchronous online education.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Heidegger (1927/2008) and van Manen (2016) were my primary sources for the design of this study. In planning it, I sought to comply with the criteria proposed by van Manen (2016) for evaluating the validity and trustworthiness of phenomenological studies—that phenomenological researchers must investigate a valid phenomenological question, gather experientially descriptive accounts, utilize primary phenomenological literature, and avoid legitimating phenomenological research with non-phenomenological sources (pp. 350-351).

Williams and Morrow (2009) reflected the modern trend in evaluating qualitative research by emphasizing trustworthiness over validity, and they proposed a three-pronged framework for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research. I have sought to protect the integrity of the data by gathering adequate data while following the established procedures of the phenomenological research tradition. Though using a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology, I attempted to elicit and reflect upon both participant expression of meaning and my interpretation. I have also attempted to provide a clear explication of my findings and their applications to research and practice.

Results

In seeking to understand this experience, I concluded that, briefly stated, it can be best understood by the concept of ambiguity. Heidegger (1927/2008) proposed the importance of “in” as the preposition best describing the state of existence, translated to “in-ness” by Vagle (2016). Heidegger’s (1927/2008) description of this philosophical construct was such that in-ness was “the relationship of Being which two entities extended ‘in’ space to have each other with regard to their location in that space” (p. 79). Those entities did not need to be sentient beings; rather, they could also include inanimate objects, places, or ideas. The core ambiguity of immersion in synchronous online education manifests itself in several ways: in a state of ambiguity regarding group membership, regarding place, and regarding functionality. It is admittedly awkward to construct the essence of something as ambiguity. To best understand, one must think about the idea of ambiguity as a state of being rather than a simple or temporary event.

Ambiguity about Group Membership

“I felt like I was a part of the class—or some of my classes,” Pat said. When in a synchronous online class where there are professors and some students in the same space, the distance students questioned their membership in the class group.

Exclusion. All the participants described feeling like an outsider at times, a feeling that is sometimes described as being “othered” by sociologists. In most cases, that was tied to professor activities although the physical separation and technological challenges served as contributing factors.

One issue that came up regularly was that of the outgoing sound from the distance students. Professors generally requested the distance students keep their microphones muted, which would further the perception of being an outsider by distance students. One student noted that, if he were physically present, he would not be able to mute himself. Some described having

off-topic or private discussions among the other distance students at their location when they felt excluded and were muted to the main classroom. Kelly recalled how, in one class, if distance students needed to interact with the professor “we had to first get his attention, we couldn't raise our hand, or we could raise our hand, but he wouldn't always see that.” Others had similar challenges. The only way to interact was to blurt out, often interrupting class due to a sound lag or what was going on in the physical classroom. Kelly continued, noting that “we usually had to turn the mic on and just speak up.” However, the distance students perceived that as being rude or disrespectful, which then further reduced their participation in the class. Pat discussed the psychology of having the microphone muted. She felt that one professor was “super-open, super-friendly,” and she had no problem un-muting the microphone and speaking up; however, she and other distance students saw it as “intimidating” to always have to un-mute the microphone if the professor had not made extra efforts to make them feel welcome to do so. Failing to mute the microphone also occasionally led to awkward situations, such as one time when as a group of distance students continued discussing for several minutes while the professor was talking and everyone could hear. Move the next line up to here.

Rob described the feeling of exclusion in this way.

Some teachers seemed to forget we were there, and [they] only spoke to the in-class people and only acknowledged us if we made ourselves really obvious. It was almost like we weren't there, and they—the teacher—didn't care that we were there sometimes.

Perhaps more than anything, the participants expressed that they just wanted to be treated the same as if they were physically present with the professor. When this did not occur, the distance students felt excluded as outsiders.

The issue of exclusion was so significant in one class that Larissa wondered “if he can

even see us on the screen because there's not very much involvement at all." She felt that the professor did have a lot of interaction built into the class, but it was confined just to those physically present and excluded those on the screen. With access to the recordings of all the classes offered this way, I observed the class Larissa had referenced through several of the recordings; and it affirmed her assertion. During the three class sessions I watched, there were regular class activities that included lecture, discussion, and question-and-answer time. The professor did not initiate any interaction with the distance students in the class after attendance was taken, and he seemed almost surprised they were there when they initiated interaction. In contrast, Larissa and other participants named specific classes where they did feel included, and there was a stark difference in the interaction. The professors in those class sessions that I observed made deliberate attempts to include distance students almost every time there was any interactivity or students were being called upon. One professor even first called on a distance student each time she initiated interaction with the class.

Inclusion. In contrast with feeling like outsiders, all those in the interviews and focus group also expressed often feeling included with the on-campus students. Larissa noted that she was content when professors would "call on us randomly just like any other students," and Diego enjoyed a math professor who "did a really good job of...getting us involved and making sure we knew how to work the problem." When her professor "takes in[to] consideration our problems and he wants to know [about us]," Julie described feeling a connection that "helps me a lot." Knowing names and personal challenges was also important for Rob, who explained that the professor

...knew all of our names, even on the screen. And I know now that it's hard to see us sometimes on the screen; and he, if we raised our hand, he would see us and call us by

name to answer the question or to ask our question.

While it might be a given for face-to-face students to raise their hands and be called upon, that was a differentiating factor for the distance students' perception of inclusivity or exclusivity.

Pat spoke fondly of some of her professors, first describing how one professor initiated out of class interaction when he “actually called me about a project that I was having trouble with.” If she had questions, another one of her professors “would tell me to log-in ... about five minutes before class, and then we could talk about it.” At times Pat found it difficult to interject herself into the class discussion or to ask questions; however, a third professor

...talks to us a lot.... She makes us feel part of the class, and she's always asking if we have feedback. So, when they make an effort to talk to us first or address us sometimes, it's easier for us to speak up.

Each such action taken by her professors built rapport with Pat, encouraging her to participate and engage with the content. Without such actions, she would have likely only had peripheral engagement with those classes as was the case in those classes where the professors did less to make her feel included.

Kelly recalled an English class where the professor made sure to include the distance students—“[the professor] would also specifically direct questions to [distance students]... making sure that she was keeping an eye on us, making sure that we were feeling involved and part of the class.” Two other professors included review activities in class, and this effort effectively engaged the distance students. Larissa described how that made the distance students feel “just like anybody else in the class” as they would “hold up our sign [to signal readiness to answer a question] just like [the face-to-face students] did, so that was neat.” Rob commented on a general education science class, in which the professor made sure they had the same

experiences as face-to-face students. Though the class did not have a lab section, it did have small hands-on activities in class. Rob loved the class and said, “We did all the dissections. He shipped us the organs.” With all the participants, small actions by the professors significantly affected whether they were perceived as being warm, caring, or desiring to have contact. The actions themselves seemed to have minimal effects, but the emotional significance was relevant.

Beyond the content, one specific event stood out in Rob’s mind—sharing cookies. With a grin and a warm chuckle, he recalled how “[the professor] even sent us food one time. He was bringing snacks in class, and he sent snacks to us, so that was cool. Just making us part of the class, that was really neat.” Mailing cookies across the country demonstrated forethought and planning to deliberately include distance students. It was a surprise that showed caring about including them in the full class experience.

Summary. Pat encapsulated this ambiguity about group membership in classes in the following comment.

One of my class[es] this semester, when they do group projects or the in-class activities, the teacher actually has a group of them call one of the Bridge to Campus students. So, we're ... a part of their group and discussing questions with them. So, things that makes [sic] me feel like an on-campus student, but when that kind of stuff doesn't happen in class or the teacher—not that they don't acknowledge us, but put as much effort as other teachers when I compare it—it doesn't make me feel like I'm a part of the class.

When distance separates students from the face-to-face students and the faculty member, it becomes important that distance students are purposefully and regularly engaged by the faculty member, perhaps even more so for them than for the on-campus students. Pat even noted the small act of saying “Hi, Pat” each time that she logged in to class made her “just feel a part of it

because he's acknowledging that I'm there.” Such deliberate actions appeared to dramatically decrease perceptions of exclusion for all the participants.

Ambiguity about Functionality

“It was very frustrating, because we had no control over it.” Such was the feeling of despair that Rob had after experiencing repeated technological issues in his synchronous online classes. The technology used to deliver synchronous online education relies upon stable function at both ends and in between, including software, hardware, and the cloud. The method of facilitating the interaction—technology—is a powerful tool for both inclusion and exclusion of the distance students. “Technology never works perfectly all the time,” Kelly opined, “but, when it does work, it's helpful.” With functionally necessary factors being broad in type and location, sometimes the technology did not function well. However, when the technology functioned normally, distance students could engage with professors and students on the campus in a way that would otherwise not have been possible

Exclusion and dysfunctionality. First impressions are incredibly powerful. Larissa recalled her first day in one of her synchronous online classes.

My wi-fi exited me out of class probably five times, and then, when I called back in, of course, it dings. Sometimes the teacher will kinda [sic] make a big deal about it, and in that case, it was made a big deal. That was embarrassing and then just kinda awkward. Connecting from a relatively remote location, the cause of the technology problem was on her end, as the internet speed was weak that day. This created a barrier to learning because time was taken away from the class and her focus was broken. She understood that the dinging noise in the campus classroom was likely a distraction, but at the same time being singled out had a psychological impact her. She did not feel welcomed and part of a group; rather, she felt isolated

and embarrassed. Soon after, she withdrew from that class and changed her major.

The technology issues were not limited to wi-fi connections at the distance sites; a variety of technical problems arose. Sometimes anything that could go wrong seemed to do so. At times, at one end or the other, there were problems with internet connections, power outages, the Zoom software, the failure of screens or monitors, and microphones or cameras not working. Any of these could result in distance students missing all or part of class. For example, Rob recalled several times when they missed “a whole project explanation, and then we would have to contact the professor to get the information for that project.” Larissa found these regular technology interruptions “frustrating, for sure” and said that they “make you feel like you wasted however long you were cut out of the class.”

Even when the technology functioned as intended, it made communication difficult. Pat noticed that she ended up communicating most frequently with by email because they “were not there physically for me to talk to after class.” However, she sometimes had to wait several days for email responses, even to simple questions. In classes where students gave presentations to the professor and campus students, technology problems could also interrupt important communication from distance students. Larissa recalled once when Zoom froze shortly after a student’s speech had begun, but they did not realize it until that student was finished; thus, the student had to present the speech again.

Inclusion and functionality. The technology used to facilitate synchronous online education also brought a unique inclusivity not provided by asynchronous learning. While asynchronous online education often results in a bifurcation of the campus-based and distance students, synchronous online education allows distance students to be included in the residential learning in a way that otherwise would not be possible. For students unable to come to campus or

who would prefer to learn in an alternate location, this technology is their access to campus through live interaction with professors and other students. Professors were also able to use the technology to provide virtual office hours to distance students.

Two specific subject areas—science and speech—afforded unique opportunities for deep interaction. To demonstrate a successful dissection in science, Rob described how they “had to identify the parts of the organs, and so we... had to hold it up to the camera and point to the parts.” This type of interaction—where items had to be shipped ahead of time across the country—was unexpected to the distance students, and thus they tended to see it as a significant gesture toward inclusion. The synchronous technology allowed them to observe the professor’s demonstration of dissection and then get immediate feedback on their own efforts. Speech courses also provided the opportunity for deep interaction facilitated by the technology. Both face-to-face and distance students were able to see each other, interact after each presentation, and get immediate feedback from the professor. Pat recalled one time when another distance student could not stop laughing while trying to present. The professor was able to use Zoom to meet individually with the student to provide personalized approaches to overcome the problem.

Summary. Synchronous online learning that blends face-to-face students with distance students is inherently inclusive on one level. It brings people together who would otherwise not be able to engage in such a way. When used to its fullest potential, professors were able to harness that interaction to not just include students but to make them *feel* included. However, technology problems sometimes excluded the distance students as they missed content, struggled to participate, or simply felt frustrated.

Ambiguity about Place

“We're not actually like a person there; we're just on a little screen.” Brittney’s statement was

quite insightful. The dual presence of distance students in synchronous online education meant that they were both present at one location in physical form and at another in virtual form. While this afforded them the option to study from a comfortable location of their choice, it also left them with ambiguity. Were they at a campground or college? Were they there to learn or have fun? Was this a more constrained face-to-face class, or was it an online class with no concern for dress, chatting, or other social norms of a classroom?

At the other end their virtual presence was unclear, and they were uncertain how they were perceived. Some had visited the campus briefly during the semester, and they reflected on how odd it was to see small faces on a screen for students attending classes that way. Some were uncertain of how—or if—their virtual presence was acknowledged.

Our here is their there. For the distance students, the idea of “here” was wherever they were located, not the college campus. That was the home of their physical presence. The college campus, along with its professors and residential students, was quite distant. Five of seven participants emphasized that they chose to do their first year through synchronous online education because it allowed them to get a soft start on college. They were able to see the experience of a traditional college campus located in Wisconsin, while staying closer to home in familiar environs. Larissa described the location from where she was taking her classes as “a comfortable place.” Sierra said that she liked being at her familiar location rather than a large campus because she knew everyone and it was “kinda [sic] like being with family.” That family atmosphere, however, did not come without squabbles and challenges associated with consistently interacting with the same people in a small space where you cannot “get away.”

Sometimes the familiarity afforded by the location was perhaps too comfortable, resulting in things happening that would not have happened in a more traditional college setting. Calvin

recalled how one day “my boy Troy caught a big ol' bass, and he brought it in[to] the class, and I gave it a big ol' wet kiss.” He reported that the professor was a bit taken aback, but he did not make a big deal out of the short disruption. Kelly sometimes struggled to hear his classes, because of “distractions from outside, like... a piece of machinery run[ning] outside or someone in the other office listening to something.” One might not think of distractors like these in the classroom environment, but with synchronous online education the classroom environment extends to wherever the students are located. The distance students in synchronous online education thus experience a different “here” than the professor and face-to-face students.

Calvin described how the distance from their physical presence to their virtual presence allowed them to mute their own sound, which often resulted in off-topic conversations.

It's really not as if you were in a classroom because when you can hit a mute button ... you can hold conversations, and the teacher has no clue. I would say it's a big hindrance that you can be able to mute yourself because, when you can mute yourself, it's an easier way to get distracted with things other than what's going on in the class.

The ability to mute outgoing sound was not, however, seen as a universal negative, because that allowed distance students to quickly ask a classmate if they missed something without disrupting the class. Diego cautioned about how things can get “too relaxed sometimes, because you know that you can do” things that you wouldn't be able to do in a face-to-face classroom.

Brittney reflected on her experience and described it as “like you're just watching TV, instead of you're in the class learning.” Being conditioned to watching television for entertainment, it could be difficult to engage in class participation with a television screen. Calvin summarized it by saying, “It's just been super easy for me to understand school, a lot better when I'm in school, the classroom atmosphere. And then when I get on the screen I'm like,

‘This isn't class.’” On their end, the class input became nothing more than a television screen, leading toward passivity. However, their outgoing feed from the cameras created a virtual presence that interacted with professors and students at the main campus.

The university is our there. The converse of this here-there paradigm shift was also true for the distance students. The idea of “there” represented a university, the home of their virtual presence. With four of the participants being first-generation college students, the allure of a university was overshadowed by austerity and a degree of intimidation. By attending that distant campus with only their virtual presence, they were able to test the waters of a university without facing the intimidating factors, seeing it as the best of both worlds.

Julie reported an awkward and embarrassing situation “when I got to my class kinda [sic] early, and I accidentally logged in to Pat's class. So, I was just sitting there, and the whole class was just staring at me.” While her physical presence was in the correct location, her virtual presence was simultaneously in the wrong location.

Sierra reflected on the challenges to communication that arose from being in different locations.

Obviously, you're not in class and you don't have that, but I don't feel like I'm at a severe disadvantage by live streaming into the class. I feel like I can still take the notes and do my part as any other college student would in studying for tests and things. I feel that, yes, the communication between the student and the teacher can be more difficult.

Her statement that she wasn't “in class” was telling. Though on the class roster, there was a perceived divide between her physical presence and virtual presence. She was content with her ability to receive course content, but interaction with the professors—a key feature of synchronous online education over asynchronous—was challenging in a way that was not an

issue for the students physically with the professor.

Summary. Students immersed in synchronous education when there is a traditional classroom on the other side experience ambiguity regarding place. Rob noted that, when presenting a speech for class, “You're not actually looking at the people. You have to look at the camera to make eye contact on campus, so then you're not actually seeing the people.” Perhaps no other situation better illustrated the bifurcation of physical presence from virtual presence. For his virtual presence to make eye contact with the professor, his physical presence had to stare into an impersonal camera with no ability to see a face looking back in that moment.

Discussion

As students went through this immersion in synchronous online education, they expressed their wish to feel like just any other student. Larissa related how, during one class, the distance students were “goofing off” while her professor was talking about listening skills. The professor noticed and “called us out in front of everybody and said that we didn't have very good listening skills, and then that was the day we realized that we were part of the class.” However, due to the geographical separation and technological medium, their different experience from face-to-face students often led to greater expectations for inclusive actions from faculty members. In fact, it often meant that professors had to go above and beyond in reaching out and making the distance students feel part of the group. Equal treatment was inadequate as they expressed a need for equitable treatment that prioritized interaction with them, more rapid responses to email communications, and extra efforts to get to make them feel comfortable and get to know them.

Technology served both as a means of delivering interactive instruction as well as making distance students feel like outsiders through dysfunction. When technology was noticeable, it was generally a problem. Students were really looking for the technology to operate

unnoticed in the background. However, problems seemed to arise quite frequently, which became a distraction and reminder of their exclusion. When professors found ways to include the distance students in everything, the classes were far better received. It became apparent that instructors and those supporting the technology must intentionally use the technology to its fullest and anticipate that problems will come. There appeared to be too many variables in the current technological infrastructure to eliminate technological problems at this stage of technological evolution. As we continue this evolution, professors and administrators need to develop best practices and create policies and plans that are sensitized to this reality in order to maximize the positives and minimize the negatives of synchronous online education.

Place also served as a source of ambiguity to these students. In a traditional class everyone is “here.” In an asynchronous online class, everyone is “there.” With synchronous online education, all participants are both “here” and “there” simultaneously. Both are perceived by the other as distant although those located on the campus may not understand they are perceived that way. To the distance students, here is not the campus classroom, but rather their campground, house, or wherever they may be joining the class. This multi-presence of the distance students—both where they are physically located and where they appear on screen—resulted in a lack of awareness about how they were perceived or welcomed. Though their presence was brought to the campus location through Zoom technology, they were still the others on the back wall or front monitors.

Limitations

Synchronous online education is highly variable, based on the software and specific approach taken by the institutions. One really cannot nail down synchronous online education as a single phenomenon; rather, it exists distinct in each institutional manifestation. As the technology

continues to evolve, so too will the experience of this phenomenon. The small number of participants in this study, though appropriate for phenomenological methodology, limits the generalizability of this study to other situations. As is common to qualitative research, the readers of the report of this study then have the responsibility of analyzing the experience and applying it to their own contexts.

Implications for Practice

It is important that institutions considering the use of synchronous online education familiarize themselves with the experience from the students' perspectives, so that they can develop an approach that meets the needs of the institution, the faculty members, and the students. As this study uncovered the ambiguity and feelings of being an outsider inherent in the experience of synchronous online education in classes blended with face-to-face students, institutions that provide such instruction should provide adequate support to minimize factors that contributed to feeling like an outsider.

Much of the feedback, both positive and negative, centered upon the actions of faculty members. Due to the perception of being an outsider brought by being at a distance, professors must be intentional in seeking to engage distance students even more than face-to-face students. Greeting distance students by name at the start of each class, finding ways for distance students to participate fully in all class activities, calling on distance students first, and being flexible when technology issues strike promote an inclusive classroom environment for this population of students. I recommend that institutions provide faculty development activities to all those teaching such courses. In fact, I believe that it would be wise for those planning to teach synchronous online courses to first seek ways to experience synchronous online content delivery as the learner rather than deliverer so that they can gain an appreciation for the experience on the

other end.

Opportunities for Further Research

As an emerging practice, synchronous online education needs increased empirical investigation. Further research is needed to describe the scope of practices, policies, and systems involved in synchronous online learning. Upon a foundation of descriptive data and analysis, research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of the approach for learning gains across settings—undergraduate and graduate, class populations with only synchronous distance students and those blended with face-to-face students, and students taking single synchronous online classes versus those taking all synchronous online classes.

Conclusion

Synchronous online education is an evolving means of delivery for education. While it has been used as a supplement to face-to-face or asynchronous online classes for several years, it is increasingly being used as a stand-alone delivery method for teaching. This study illuminated the experience of what it is like for students to take all their freshman classes through synchronous online education, and institutions delivering instruction in this way would be wise to learn from these experiences to design more effective learning experiences. The experience for the participants in this study was fraught with ambiguity regarding group membership, functionality, and place. While functional technology on both ends was a basic necessity, the flexibility and engagement of faculty members was most significant at mitigating the other issues of ambiguity that the students experienced.

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