

Lasting Effects: What the Post Pandemic Return to In-person Teaching Tells Us About the State of e-Learning and its Future Trajectory

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Abstract: An outpouring of studies on the forced move to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed deep concerns with teaching and learning online. Yet, now that most learning is returning to pre-pandemic environments, it seems naive to assume that teachers and learners in these settings, are, or will ever be, the same. A deeper understanding of the impact of those online experiences on teachers and learners before, during and immediately after the pandemic can provide insight into how to move forward in our educational systems, where technology is increasingly implicated. The conceptual framework of the study was based on the three key features of contemporary e-learning theory: learner-centred, community-based, constructivist-driven. We mapped this framework against course design, teaching approach and the use of technology to conceptualize the conditions that existed in returning to in-person teaching in a blended learning setting. This framework uncovers the developments, constraints, openness, and fears of a group of Higher Education (HE) EFL Chilean teachers in leading students into technology-enhanced, 21st century learning environments. A qualitative case study methodology was employed. Findings are based on written responses to an 8-item open questionnaire ($n=32$) and individual, oral-based ($n=13$) interviews along with field notes. Evidence of a significant advancement in digital literacy skills on the part of teachers, and indeed students was uncovered. Untypical in the Chilean educational context, a strong shift towards valuing more social constructivist teaching practices and an awareness of the importance of fostering relationship-building in learning ecologies, both in person and online, was also revealed. Changes attributed to both positive experiences online and reactions to negative ones, bode well for those long seeking a shift away from a traditional educational mindset that existed prior to the pandemic. At the same time, the findings that reveal hesitancy and in some cases fear of the rapidly encroaching new technologies, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, indicate that for some teachers the embrace of technology has its limits. We discuss both encouraging and more concerning results in terms of the insight they offer and their implications for further e-learning research and for educational stakeholders operating in increasingly technology-dependent learning spaces.

Keywords: Higher Education; Contemporary E-Learning Theories; Post Pandemic; AI Tools and Affordances; Agency; Identity

1. Introduction and Background

The deep shift in ways to practice teaching and learning that many educational stakeholders at all levels of the system were called upon to adopt during the COVID-19 pandemic could easily, and perhaps purposely, be forgotten. Yet now that the pandemic period is behind us, increasing numbers of scholars are asking what we can learn from these experiences. Can we simply go back to our pre-COVID ways? To our previous conventional epistemological and ontological assumptions that defined our perspectives on learning and learners? To our established mindsets about student and teacher roles? About the value, or lack of value we place on digital spaces and e-learning? Or having lived through such a period of profound challenges, do we now question with more determination than ever how we practice education?

The global proliferation of studies documenting the COVID-19 challenges in education have raised many such questions that are now preoccupying researchers globally. Recent reviews of this scholarship are pointing especially to teachers and the vital role they were called upon to play in the unanticipated need to practice remote teaching during the pandemic years (Martin et al., 2023). Calls for more post pandemic research into teachers and their practices is a common theme in these reviews. Gaps cited in these reviews call, for example, more research connected to teachers' professional development opportunities to teach in online spaces (Wright et al., 2023; Doo et al., 2023), to the roles teachers assume when it comes to developing successful course designs, measuring outcomes and dealing with discord (Ahlf and McNeil, 2023), research into teacher agency (Dennen, 2022), into teachers' practices in the areas of assessment (Heil and Iffenthaler, 2023), into their innovative practices in the use of technologies (Zhang et al, 2022) to promote intersubjectivity and engagement (Dennen et al., 2023).

Our study was aimed at responding to these collective teacher-focused calls. Our focus was on a group of Chilean HE English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and their experiences teaching during the pandemic online and in the academic year of 2022 when they returned to "regular" blended teaching. By collecting and analyzing

their stories and perspectives, we hoped to gain insight into their e-learning practices, and indirectly those of their students. Importantly, we also sought to uncover a deeper understanding of how they were moving forward in terms of their use of technology in the “new reality”. Indeed, many of the topics raised in these accounts match the gaps in e-learning research highlighted in the reviews of e-learning scholarship listed above. In initiating this inquiry, we were keenly aware that our focus on this group of Chilean educators and giving voice to their experiences with technology-mediated learning could help serve to address concern raised in recent literature about the imbalance that exists in e-learning scholarship, between research emanating from the global north and south (Zhang et al., 2022).

The following questions guided the inquiry:

1. How did a group of Chilean HE educators experience online learning during the pandemic? What were their challenges and reactions to these challenges?
2. In their view, what changes, if any, did they make in their roles and teaching practices after the return to hybrid learning?
3. From their perspectives, what has been the impact of the pandemic on their views of the use of technology, on their practices and on their identities as teachers?

In the next sections, we discuss the theory and relevant literature that informed and framed our study, followed by a description of our methodological choices, including details about the research design, the context and participants. We then provide an analysis of the data we collected and conclude the report with the results of the inquiry, its limitations and implications.

2. Theory and Literature Underpinnings

2.1 Ideal Conditions for Teaching and Learning Online

Few educators would dispute that for many in their positions, conditions for learning online during the pandemic were far from ideal. Scholars who have studied ways to promote such ideal conditions and to help support teachers to connect theory to effective practice have pointed to the alignment of design, pedagogy, and technology as essential. Based on accounts of online learning challenges experienced by many during the pandemic (Vlachopoulos et al., 2021), in far too many contexts these conditions were absent. Yet as Adinda et al. (2020) have shown, it is in the epistemological conformity of instructional design, pedagogical practice, and the use of technology with contemporary learning theories and 21st century goals that quality learning can be achieved (See Figure 1).

Essentially, these theories and goals i) place learners and their agency at the centre of the learning; ii) are based on an understanding that learning is a complex social interactive phenomenon; iii) involve learners in communities collaborating on co-constructing knowledge based on their individual social contexts and experiences; and iv) have important implications for learners’ competencies and identities in a highly dynamic, technology-driven society (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Chavez, 2019). Of course, implied in creating these kinds of scenarios in learning contexts presumes that teachers’ roles, identities, and the agency they assume are collectively and substantially different than those of teachers in conventional teaching contexts.

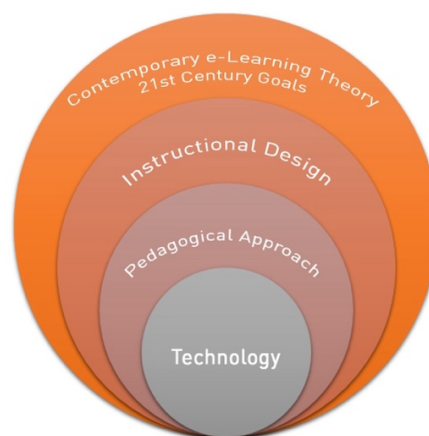


Figure 1: Model of effective online learning conditions.

2.2 Connecting Teachers' Roles with Agency and Identity

In an effort to gain inroads into actually applying contemporary learning theories and 21st century goals so that learning contexts reflect the characteristics listed above, attention in scholarship has primarily been on learners and finding ways to increase their active agentive roles in their learning process. At the same time, these trajectories towards change have altered in a profound way not only learners' roles but those of teachers' as well. From long-held expectations to be content experts and transmitters of information in typical conventional teaching settings, teachers are asked to take on facilitator roles in contemporary learning ones. Of the many skills implied in assuming roles as guides, teachers are compelled to create learner-centred designs, engaging group projects, to promote and manage class communities and experiment with innovative assessment practices, not to mention be models of care and support. For many teachers, this transition has brought with it serious challenges. Not the least of these challenges has been how to embrace change, and simultaneously not relinquish the last remains of agency they consider having in the oftentimes hierarchal spaces they inhabit in educational settings (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Chavez, 2019). As Ashton (2022, p.2) points out: "there is still much to learn about the complex ways in which individual teachers exercise their agency in their day-to-day teaching practice, particularly when these routines are disrupted".

There is little doubt that COVID-19 led to such a disruption. The breakdown in routines caused by the emergency move to online teaching during the pandemic left many teachers worldwide questioning their roles and re-examining their professional agency (Ashton, 2022). According to Leijen et al. (2020), from an ecological perspective this reflective process involves teachers looking at their past experiences, considering future plans and goals, evaluating them in order to make decisions and taking appropriate action, i.e. making changes, in the present. In this contextually dependent process, reflection and evaluation are key to teachers exercising their agency. Importantly, acts of resistance to change are also forms of exercising agency. Still, in situations where a teacher views that there are little or no options available but to adhere to the status quo, their agency can be considered severely limited.

Adapting to educational changes, as teachers experienced in the pivot to online learning during COVID, are closely connected to changes in their professional identities. By identity, we reference Norton (Darvin and Norton, 2015, p. 4) who defines the construct as "the way a person understands their relationship with the world, how that relationship is built across time and space, and how the person understands the possibilities for the future". When teachers confront changes in their working worlds, they are required to re-negotiate their professional identities which impacts their response to change (Ashton, 2022). Vähäsantanen (2015) posits that how teachers see themselves or aspire to see themselves as teachers is key to understanding their agency and decision making. The author also underlines the importance of teachers being able to act according to their present or imagined professional identities. When a conflict arises between what teachers see as acting according to their professional identities and an identity expected of them on the part of a global pandemic, an institution, or students for example, as in the case of teaching online for the first time, teachers will attempt to 'meet in the middle' (Vähäsantanen, 2011). Scholars argue that in those situations where agency is limited, in other words where 'meeting in the middle' is not an option, emotional reactions that influence teachers' motivation and well-being can be impacted negatively. Comas-Quin's (2011) call echoes our own (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Galdames, 2023) for more research into the connection between teachers' agency and their identity in confronting deep educational change especially in digital environments as many educators faced during the pandemic, including the participants in the present study.

3. Methodology

A qualitative case study research methodology was chosen for the study for several reasons: i) its suitability for investigating complex human activity and for uncovering participant voices (Denizen et al. 2005,); ii) its underlining goal to study real-life contemporary systems in-depth and over time (Creswell, 2013b, Da Costa, 2016); iii) the potential within a case to develop theory, evaluate programs, and develop interventions (Baxter, 2008); iv)); iii) the connection the case study assumes between the researcher(s) and participants. In this case for example, one researcher is a colleague of the participants while the other leads the program in which the teacher participants teach. Ethical guidelines established by the institution to protect the rights and privacy of the participants, were strictly adhered to throughout the case study process including informed and signed written consent collected from each participant who was interviewed.

3.1 Context and Participants

The study was carried out in a HE institution in Chile, a South American country located on the western edge of the continent. Politically, Chile is a presidential republic. Until 2021, the country had experienced significant economic growth and had been recognized as one of the most developed nations in Latin America. Since then, growth has slowed, which has brought about less productivity and progress in equity. Chile also faces social and economic inequalities, which have led to ongoing discussions and protests regarding social plus educational issues and demands for reforms (The World Bank, 2023). These issues weigh heavily on the minds of all Chileans.

Chile has a well-established HE system. Numerous universities and institutions offer a wide range of academic programs and degrees. The country has made efforts to improve access to HE, and a significant proportion of the population enrolls in tertiary education. Particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has been adopted with varying degrees of success, representing a considerable challenge for institutions, faculty, and students (Montero et al, 2022). Chile has invested in technological infrastructure and initiatives to support online learning, including the provision of internet access to remote areas. Although most people have access to the internet, its quality depends on family income (Yeomens Cabrera and Silva Fuentes, 2022). The digital divide is evident in the level of technological resources available in various Chilean households. For example, in 2020, 76% of higher income families had a personal computer, laptop or tablet, whereas only 45% of lower income families had one, and 16% had none (Milesi, 2022). Despite such challenges, and to provide wider access to education, universities and other educational institutions have implemented virtual learning platforms and tools to deliver courses and facilitate remote collaboration. A few institutions offer fully online programmes for working adults, making it possible for this sector to obtain a first or second professional degree and to promote their lifelong learning.

The participants in this study are EFL instructors who at the time were employed by the largest private university in Chile. The teaching staff consists of about 90 instructors, who are mostly Chilean EFL instructors, having obtained their EFL teaching qualifications at a Chilean HE institution, and holding a Master's degree in the areas of Education, Linguistics, or TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages). Regarding gender, 70% of teachers are female and 30% male. Over 90% of the EFL instructors at this institution have a part-time contract. Such contract work is typical among Chilean private HE institutions which do not receive public funding, posing several challenges. Among teachers' employment challenges are uncertainty about their employment status, limited or no benefits and heavy teaching workloads, as they often juggle multiple teaching positions across different HE institutions to earn sufficient income (Simbürger and Neary, 2016).

Teachers in Chile also face pedagogical challenges. Teaching students with varying proficiency levels of English that may require differentiated instruction and additional support can be particularly demanding for part-time instructors without sufficient resources or training (Lombardi, 2018). Part-time instructors might have limited autonomy in designing their curriculum and assessment methods. Often, they need to follow predetermined syllabi or teaching guidelines, which may or may not match their teaching approach or their students' needs (Nehrbass et al, 2022). EFL instructors employed in the institution where the study took place deliver English courses that are mandatory in all undergraduate curricula. In view of globalisation, this requirement responds to a government initiative to promote English learning to its population. The official language, spoken by 99,5% of the population in Chile, is Spanish. Reportedly, only 10,2% can communicate in English (The World Factbook, 2023). Students enrolled in those courses have varying proficiency levels of English and are often not motivated enough to learn English since they do not perceive it as a necessary tool for their academic and future professional development. Thus, EFL instructors often face continuing challenges in teaching such HE courses.

3.2 Research Design

The research design consisted of three overlapping phases (Table 1). In the first phase, access to the research site was gained through the agreement of the director of the English Language Learning (ELL) program, herself a researcher and co-author of the report, who was also able to provide access to the teachers' contact information. Having the director involved in the research provided insight into valuable background for the study both institutionally and from the greater educational context in Chile. Also, research into effective educational institutional change has shown the importance of multi-level – *macro*, *meso* and *micro* involvement (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Chavez, 2019). Since one of the main drivers for the study was based on making changes to the online teaching programs at the site, the implication of the meso-level director seemed an obvious advantage.

Table 1: Phases of the Study and Data Collection

Phase	Type of Data	Description
Phase 1: Gaining access December 2022 – January 2023	Field notes	Collaborative discussions with director about challenges being faced in the ELL Program. Agreement to collaborate on the inquiry gained. Contact information of teachers shared and e-mails sent to all faculty members in the Program ($n=89$).
Phase 2: Seeking support from faculty January to March 2023	Online questionnaire	Teachers' support solicited and response given through completion of Online Google Form ($n=32$).
Phase 3: Follow-up teacher support. January to March, 2023	Teacher interviews	Recorded ZOOM sessions held, consisting of 40 to 60-minute follow-up conversations with teachers ($n=13$) describing in-depth experiences with the use of technology, both their own and those of students, pre, during and post pandemic.

In the second phase, January to March 2023, individual teachers in the ELL program ($n= 89$) were solicited by e-mail, for their consent to participate in the study. Teachers who volunteered ($n=32$) responded in text-based written format to a questionnaire which included 8 open-ended items. Essentially, these items requested their views on their online teaching experiences in the period 2020 and 2021, and also when they returned to f2f classrooms in the context of blended courses in 2022.

In phase three, March to April 2023, interviews were conducted with a self-selected group of the ELL teachers ($n=13$) who had indicated their willingness to participate in response to the questionnaire. The individual, 40 to 60-minute, open-ended interviews were conducted as a follow-up to the emerging data from the questionnaires and to gain deeper insight into teachers' educational experiences teaching in the ELL program during three periods: i) in blended courses *prior* to the pandemic, ii) fully online *during* the pandemic and iii) in both semesters of the first year, March 2022 to July and August to December 2022 when teachers were back teaching in a blended learning scenario.

The analysis of the extensive data collected through all three phases in this design led to a deep understanding of the evolving roles, practices, and identities of these teachers online pre, during and post Pandemic and their aspirations for and hesitations about teaching with technology in the ensuing years.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using the various qualitative tools listed in Table 1. We position our analysis of this data within a social constructionist epistemology. The data corpus was analyzed using grounded qualitative coding methods involving a combined inductive-deductive process (Miles et al., 2014). After establishing a conceptual framework rooted in agency and identity elements within the sociocultural contexts of teaching pre, during and post pandemic, a series of iterative steps were taken. These steps included: i) inspecting the data sets for data that shed light on the various kinds of experiences participants had during the pandemic, on the changes to their roles and the impact they felt that this period had on their views of themselves as educators; ii) multiple readings and considerations of the data sets looking for similarities and differences in the stories that were being recounted and comparing these stories with other sources of data; iii) condensing and coding the data for key concepts and ideas that related to the theoretical concepts of identity and agency and comparing this data with findings from other studies during and post pandemic; iv) actively identifying and refining salient or common patterns or themes as well as selecting representative data extracts to support these themes from the coded data; v) forming a conceptual framework that could be corroborated by the findings that were uncovered. Through this rigorous process, we sought to ensure the reliability of our findings.

4. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

There is a famous musical lyric suggesting that in life we should never take more than we give. Yet, it seems that educational systems, in Chile at least, in many ways have built their institutional operations on the assumption that teachers are prepared to give *far* more than they are ever offered or receive in return. During the years of the pandemic, the demands on teachers globally, and no less so in Chile, could be considered unprecedented. Not only were most teachers dealing with their personal situations in the midst of a global pandemic, but also with the responsibility of assuring that effective learning continued for the multitude of students for whom their job was "to educate". While the impact of those years uncovered in the accounts of the teacher participants in

our inquiry are diverse and complex, two major themes surfaced in the analysis that shed light on what those demands have meant in terms of their practices and professional teacher identities in the aftermath of COVID. We label these two themes that are discussed in the following sections as: 1) Negative impact of pandemic teaching on teachers’ roles, agency and identities and 2) Positive impact of pandemic teaching on teachers’ roles, agency and identities.

4.1 Negative Impact of the Pandemic on Teachers’ Roles, Agency, and Identities

Table 2: Negative impact of the pandemic on teachers

Negative Impact	Representative Excerpt from the Data
Teachers lose agency over decision making	“I don’t know what happened and why they [administration] did that decision, but we just have to follow.” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers forced to revert to conventional teaching practices	“No, I can’t [couldn’t] talk to students, so it was only presenting.” (Interview, March 2023) “ You can’t do much...And it becomes this kind of radio show” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers find little incentive to building community in their classrooms	“I didn’t have much time to create that student-teacher relationship, so attendance was super low, very, very low.” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers lose control over assessment practices and results	“We couldn’t ask that much from them...Lots of students ended up passing the courses even though they did not have the competencies”. (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers regarded as service providers by students and institution”	“...that is the way now that students are more than students, they are customers, they want a service and they want to learn without suffering.” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers suffer emotionally, in terms of confidence and motivation	“I had a gray wall...and there were no answers [from students [online] so I started to feel frustrated and not motivated at all.” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers face a change in their role - no longer viewed as information experts	“...this idea of traditional education in the sense that this guy, this professional that needs... to have information like handy, is changing.” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers forced to accept lower standards	We were not able to ask that much [of students] ... because we were not able to be demanding like we couldn’t ask that much from them...we couldn’t be so demanding or strict about anything.” (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers lose satisfaction of being effective promoters of learning	I worked hard for students...to feel comfortable and confident... but I think I wasn’t, I wouldn’t say very successful. “ (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers are forced to assume changes to their natural teacher identities	“I love to improve my own teaching experience... but then I feel nobody cares.” (Interview, March 2023)

Many of participants in the study were well aware that the sudden transition to online learning had a profound impact on what transpired in their classrooms. They also revealed how changes that occurred in those spaces impacted their roles as teachers, their practices, the agency they felt they had and their views of themselves as professionals. Of course, most of these changes were inextricably tied to the actions of students who were adapting themselves to a new way of learning entirely in virtual spaces. Table 1 summarizes what the data revealed in terms of these conditions. For some, the loss of decision-making power over materials, assessment, student behaviours and attendance, the change in status from being considered a content expert and effective promoter of learning, the feelings of being forced to assume untypical roles, such as non-dynamic and strict enforcers of rules, as well as the assuming of a lack of confidence about teaching online left these teachers feeling lonely, unmotivated, and questioning the value of their profession. In these situations, many found themselves re-negotiating their long-held identities (Ashton, 2022). For example, Francisco explains: “This idea of traditional education...that this guy, this professional that needs to have information...is changing”. Many shared that they became frustrated and saw little hope online in trying to build community or to engage students in interactive behaviours. Maria poignantly remarks: “I didn’t have much time to create that student-teacher relationship” and as a result student attendance severely suffered in her class. In this unfulfilling setting, several participants spoke of a lack of drive to encourage self-directedness, learner centred practices, and critical thinking among their students – practices discussed above that underline contemporary e-learning theories, 21st century goals leading to quality online learning results (Zhang et al. 2022; Charbonneau-Gowdy and Galdames, 2022). Maria reveals: “We couldn’t ask that much from them [students]”. And Fernanda adds: “... nobody cares” when describing the extra effort that she was making online. It’s little wonder that in the wake of such circumstances, many of these teachers lost their confidence and passion for teaching post pandemic. Fernanda expresses the losses she felt in her typical empowered identity as a teacher in her words: “I worked hard for students... to feel comfortable and confident, but I think I wasn’t...very successful.” In her testimony, as from others, it was clear that the pandemic was a turning point for many in the ways they viewed themselves as professionals and their roles as leaders in guiding students’ learning processes.

4.2 Positive Impact of the Pandemic on Teachers' Roles, Agency and Identities

Table 3: Positive impact of the pandemic on teachers

Positive impact	Representative Excerpt from the Data
Teachers feel empowered and confident in their digital literacy skills	"It [online teaching] had a great influence since the return to f2f classes helped me improve my teaching practice, incorporating more technology to carry out a more active teaching practice." (Questionnaire, January 2023).
Teachers recognize more than ever the importance of building community with technology	"We need it [building community] because we cannot work on our lessons without sharing." (Interview, March 2023) I find learning is a relationship and if you don't have that strong relationship students don't really not only engage in the class...(Interview, March 2023)
Teachers regain control over their classroom practices	"The freedom of teaching is just the class...not the evaluation. "
Teachers acknowledge the need to exploit their students' increased use of technology for learning	"Flip ... [the app]...you can generate your video doc.. It's just great! You can give an opinion using video or audio. I have used it a lot...because it helped me with my students [in] using technology." (Interview, March 2023).
Teachers take on role as data miner for appropriate learner-centred digital materials and tools	"I became more skillful surfing the internet and finding useful material for my classes." (Questionnaire 2023)
Teachers appreciate the value of using technology for engaging learners in active interaction for learning	"[With the podcast], they were all so engaged and enjoying the discussions...They spontaneously told me that they loved it and that they spoke from the heart. " (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers rethink their perspectives on assessment practices	"I now use technology to assess." (Questionnaire, January 2023). "Some evaluations are easier to apply [using technology] and feedback can be also easily administered and recorded on these platforms." (Questionnaire, January 2023).
Teachers are more critical in terms of the agency they need from their institutions to be effective	"Then we receive everything and then we have to explore how to teach and how to incorporate things that are on the platform...but just follow the platform. Everything is done and you cannot modify." (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers have renewed enthusiasm for teaching	"What I can say is that in 2022 my passion for teaching was reignited." (Questionnaire, January 2023). "I felt enchanted again with my profession." (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers become partners with students in promoting self-directed learning behaviours	"More students than ever before asked me for extra work or additional activities...asking me about specific websites where they could practice their grammar." (Interview, March 2023)
Teachers see their roles as leaders in directing learners in the use of powerful AI technologies	"I'm beginning to use Chat GBT with students and to embrace it, yet be critical" (Questionnaire, January 2023).

Without denying the long-term impact of what occurred during the pandemic pivot to online learning, many of the participants were able to see some advantages to their teaching from the challenges they had faced during the pandemic. In Table 2, we summarize these findings with support from the data. Analysis of the various data sets revealed that in their return to blended programming and thus f2f teaching, there were teachers who felt comfortable and indeed excited to incorporate technology into their daily teaching practices (Engeness, 2020). As Marco, one of the teachers remarks: "I felt enchanted again with my profession." Another participant, Stefano, shares that his passion for teaching was reignited because of all that he had learned online and that he was able to apply that knowledge post pandemic. Many recognized that their students had become far savvier and indeed interested in the use of technology. They observed their students beginning to acknowledge that technology served not only their social media interests but that they could benefit from its powerful potential for learning. It was obvious to many of these teachers that the climate had changed in terms of implicating digital tools actively in their practices. Indeed, some participants reported taking a leadership role in working with their students to critically investigate the uncharted use of AI tools for learning (Godwin-Jones, 2022). As Carlos, one of the teachers reveals: "I feel we have to embrace it [AI] somehow. It's... it's there. No point in trying to fight it. There's no going back...I know that's the road we must travel" (Interview, March 2023). In his testimony, Carlos is recognizing, as did others although not all, that teachers will need to assume a clear stand on AI tools and embrace their advantages instead of fearing their power over the way individuals learn.

Another major impact of the pivot to online learning on teachers was the realization on the part of many participants not only of the powers of technology but the advantages of combining these tools with course designs and pedagogical practices that result in access to quality learning (Charbonneau-Gowdy and Galdames, 2022). Most revealed suffering both emotionally and professionally through the period of the pandemic with virtually little or no engagement from students online and daily facing a "grey wall" (Consuelo, Interview, March 2023). Yet, once back in f2f classrooms and a return to blended learning, several teachers reported feeling enthusiastic about developing learner-centred practices, engaging students in constructivist learning, developing strategies to promote student group work, self-directed learning and especially to build community. Some spoke excitedly about employing strategic and emerging technology resources for both learning and assessment – all further evidence of their aligning design, pedagogy and technology resources that are proven to lead to quality learning results. Some teachers predicted that the experiences online during the pandemic were leading to a major transition in education.

While all teachers acknowledged the after-effects of the pandemic, their responses to the “new reality” were mixed. Some saw students’ lackluster attitudes, their emotional instability, and their unwillingness to adopt to the online learning side of their blended courses as further challenges. Others saw it as an exciting time - a time to not only raise standards but also to rethink standards about assessment, about efficient ways of learning, and about the value to learning in engaging with others. Some shared their view of this post pandemic period as a time to re-ignite the spirit of being together in an active learning community, supported by technology tools where learning is experienced as fun and worthwhile. Rosario comments about introducing game-based learning strategies: “Yeah they got excited...That’s what we want as teachers, not only in terms of students being engaged in class and interacting in a very positive way...I felt more satisfied because I felt they were also enjoying their learning more...We want that affirmation that our students want to learn.” (March, 2023). Through her students’ enthusiasm, Rosario mediates her identity as a teacher as fulfilled and empowered, confident that she is being an effective educator.

These extracts as well as others cited above attest to the changing times teachers are facing in their post pandemic professional lives. For some, the impact of what they had experienced online during the two years of the pandemic resulted in their being skeptical and wary of what lay ahead. According to several participants, angst about how to navigate their students’ emotional states, distant attitudes, the lack of importance students were placing on grades and succeeding, left teachers accepting the fact that things would never be the same – that they were facing a “revolution” as Marco puts it and that AI would help kindle that revolution further. Others saw their online experiences and the return to classroom teaching as an opportunity to take a more active role in introducing deep changes to their approaches in their blended learning practices and how they promote learning that will have 21st century benefits for their students’ skills in the immediate and long term. Referring to the inevitability of the presence of AI in these spaces, with conviction Leona shares: “We need to do things differently.” (March 2023).

5. Conclusion

Reflection is essential to change. As one teacher participant Carlos remarked: “If there is no reflection, we won’t be able to see the mistakes we’ve made and improve.” (Interview, March 2023). Our study is an effort to incite reflection. We believe this reflection is not just limited to Chile where educational change has been slow to materialize despite government efforts. Reflection is needed more extensively in the other global contexts that have shared and are facing similar and new challenges as they migrate to a variety of spaces, virtual and otherwise. Given the understandings we have uncovered, it seems obvious to us that the pandemic has had a deep impact, on teachers, their roles, their identities, and their practices that will ultimately influence learning in the next decade in ways that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago. Marco observes: “I probably changed for ever. I don’t think it will ever(sic) be the same.” (Interview, March, 2023). We strongly believe that the implications for learning from the pandemic’s impact will be seen in teachers i) expertly guiding students to rethink the use of powerful emerging technologies in more critical ways, ii) partnering with students in learning how to exploit technologies for their most positive benefits, iii) strongly encouraging students to assume the direction of their own learning in novel, exciting and life-long ways and supported by technology , iv) having more collaborative control over decision-making with regard to theoretically aligning the materials, designs and technologies they use and v) being able to access the professional support they need to be leaders in learning - whatever that entails as the century progresses. While we acknowledge the limitations in terms of the size of our study and the context-specific nature perhaps of some of the conditions, we believe these results add a powerful incentive to others in the research community to add much needed empirical evidence. This evidence is critical for our global society to emerge from these difficult years with renewed enthusiasm for valuing and supporting teachers at this key moment in history to use the best technology has to offer for improving education opportunities for all.

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