

Autoethnographies: Academics Experiences and Lessons Learned From the Pandemic. Reshaping Academic Ways of Being and Doing

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Abstract: After a critical review of the impact of change on people's lives, we report on an empirical study highlighting three major aspects of academic life that the pandemic affected, providing supporting examples. The method used is first textual analysis for the critical review based on what the literature identifies as difficulties brought about by change (CBIA, 2022; Senge, 1990). The empirical study is of a qualitative nature (Creswell, & Poth, 2018) based on the analysis of observations in a personal journal, and aims at uncovering academic concerns during the pandemic. The findings will be valuable to academics to reshape their 'new normal'. Results include for the theoretical part of the literature review the fact that change impacts people and one cannot come back to prior positioning. Several findings from the analysis of the observational notes are centered around three main areas. The first issue was due to the short time span for new implementations and hence no time for foresight. This encompasses consequences of trial and error, more administrative control, and uncertainty of outcomes with contradictory discourses been held. Added to that there was a human cost that far exceeded what would normally be the case. For instance academic colleagues quitting or retiring early, unevenness in support provided, isolation in some cases compared to overabundance of support in others, perhaps even favoritism. The third major observation pointed to consequences on the instructional context. In this case, a number of positive outcomes were noted. More effort was placed on student engagement and learning, and it was all made visible. More activities were devised based on gaming strategies, and serious work was made more motivating. A better feel for knowledge integration was possible due to on-line learning for students who put some effort into it. Some observations however led to drawing conflicting conclusions. Finally, we discuss new future pathways. For instance, it is important to develop self-regulation in students and resilience for all concerned. There also appears to be a need to provide active support to everyone on an on-going basis as we move past the crisis.

Keywords: the impact of change, moving past the crisis, contradictions and conflicts, instructional and people outcomes

1. Introduction

Many people left their profession during the pandemic without any intention of returning to their position. This problem is acute in North America as is evidenced by CBIA (2022), "Our labor shortage is a full-blown crisis-we have 110,000 job openings, yet our labor force losses since the beginning of the pandemic represent an astonishing 10% of the national decline". People have a hard time coping and especially those who were already negatively impacted by their jobs before COVID 19. As a more specific example, there is a large teacher shortage in Canada, due mostly to burn-out. Labelle (2021) uncovered that Canada needs 10,000 teachers just to cover demands in the French Immersion programs. French teachers especially seem to be more susceptible to burn-out according to Viswanathan (2019) and the pandemic did not help this fact as teachers had to suddenly start teaching online without prior notice nor time to adjust.

In the academic context, change during the pandemic, especially with the back and forth from face to face to online teaching created tense moments for everyone, and people lacking resilience and self-efficacy skills (Bandura, 1997) were more affected by these somewhat chaotic situations. Compounding the difficulties was the fact that no real help was available with the switch to online teaching due to regulation imposed.

Senge (1990) expands extensively on the impact of change in normal circumstances. Given the added stress due to the pandemic, some personal situations became very strained.

When in addition people are facing inconsistent discourses, the problems look more challenging as it is impossible to know what decision is the right one to make.

All while perhaps thinking of being helpful, with maybe the best intentions at heart, a number of contradictory strategies were implemented at different levels by administration, adding more possibilities to lead astray. Nevertheless, thanks to Faculty and Staff members' good will and innovative thinking as well as positive actions taken, results were not as devastating as they could have been. However, two of my colleagues though retired at the end of year because of the problems caused. So, the question is regarding how far we have come with accepting this new normal. The new normal refers to the aftermath of the COVID 19 pandemic. A new normal

refers to a state following a crisis when the situation in which people find themselves is different from the one at the beginning of the crisis. The expression was used after World War I (Wise Wood, 1918) and subsequent crises.

The overall methodological approach is qualitative. The method used first is textual analysis for the critical review based on what the literature identifies as difficulties brought about by change (CBIA, 2022; Senge, 1990) finding the appropriate meanings and contextual implications. We examined the context of change by looking at the structure, content and meanings in research on change and its implications, more specifically, the underlying cultural and ideological aspects and how they were connected to the particular way the texts were produced.

The empirical study is of a qualitative nature too (Creswell, & Poth, 2018) based on the analysis of observations in a personal journal and aims at uncovering academic concerns during the pandemic. This study is of an autoethnographic nature. The research used self-reflection to write about anecdotes and personal experiences in a wider context to provide underlying meaning making. Authors (Ellingson, & Ellis, 2008) have come to the conclusion that various applications of autoethnography are making it difficult to clearly define it. Due to a focus on personal experience and subjectivity, a conscious effort was made to tell a story to add to existing knowledge. Although this knowledge is situated and can be contested, it provides insight into an experience. The researcher made every effort to tell the story in good faith.

The findings will be valuable to academics to reshape their 'new normal'. In this process the researcher looked into details to identify text units and categorize them for classification. The analysis aimed at uncovering details to interpret embedded meanings and to reflect upon the context and the themes in the data. Then connections were established, and understandings uncovered. In doing so the researcher combined knowledge from linguistics and semiotics.

Other limitations stem from the fact that the time frame for Senge's seminal work on change much precedes the time frame of the very recent journal entries on classroom observations. In retrospect the researcher feels that having in addition used literature on curriculum change could have brought about another dimension. However, usually researchers in curriculum innovation refer to innovation theory, perhaps not so useful here as the change that happened to people in the context of this research was not a planned change.

The study being of a qualitative nature does not allow to generalize results. Although the researcher tried to take distance from the data, regularly questioning whether there was any possibility of bias and trying to be as objective as possible, there could still have been a certain amount of subjectivity influencing the results. In an attempt at interpreting and evaluating hidden messages, the journal entries were also written, and a preference for certain ways of interpreting the data show. Nevertheless, the initial journaling took place as a regular routine and this before and not even having any idea that the journal could serve to develop a research study on the topics of interest here.

The background for the analysis is based in systems thinking (Senge), a process that is supposed to be balanced with delay as reflection is required. This is a simple cycle where an action in one direction eventually causes a reverse effect on the same variable. It is interesting because the delay frequently makes people overreact when their first action appears to be ineffective.

In our situation there was no time to delay anything, after weeks of in-person teaching suddenly teaching was mandated to be online only, followed again with in-person teaching and subsequent on-line teaching with a quick turn-around and quick on the spur of the moment decision making. This involved shifts in class preparations, changes of mindsets, removal of human contact among other aspects.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Senge's (1990) thinking about organizational change is key in situations of rapid change, uncertainty and increased complexity as what was happening with COVID 19. However to be able to cope, the change mindset already should be in place, otherwise necessary delays for implementation will also cause havoc. Learning organizations have to change adaptively in response to problems, and based on collaborative insight and shared values. Open dialogue is necessary for new implementations. According to Senge, the five areas that should be

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under scrutiny are: 1. Personal mastery, entailing honest reflection and evaluation for the purpose of identifying individual and organizational shortcomings, strengths, needs and goals. The ability to know oneself; how one reacts to situations and people. The ability to see how one's beliefs affect their environment. Being open to change and new ideas. Having a personal vision that causes internal tension and a desire to change and move in new directions. 2. Mental Models, having to do to with the explicit understanding of an otherwise implicit personal and organizational assumptions, biases, schemata, points of view, and so on. Love of truth and openness are the goals to shoot for in this discipline. Understanding that we all have mental models and willingness to examine our own along with those of the organization. 3. Shared Vision, pointing to the practice of clear definition and more important, enactment of guiding principles and aspirations. Connecting people by generating visions that integrate personal vision for life and for the organization into an organic, living whole. 4. Team Learning, i.e. the practice of collaborative learning and supportive group inquiry. The practiced discipline of learning together, developing the best plan for the group. Having true dialog amongst colleagues. Increasing the collective intelligence above that of any one person in the room with the view that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. 5. Systems Thinking, corresponding to the powerful holistic approach to viewing organizational behavior. This is the ability to see the patterns behind any behavior, whether it is in a unit or on a much more personal level.

Senge spends a lot of time describing the idea and giving examples of how systems thinking provides leverage to make significant changes. The author also defines several archetypes of systems that he encounters over and over again. The basic cycles are balancing processes and reinforcing processes.

These theoretical underpinnings are aimed at developing three core learning capabilities: fostering aspiration, developing reflective conversation, and understanding complexity.

Systems thinking involves a fair amount of complexity, according to Luhmann (1984) and the author shows how we need to reduce complexity in order to be able to handle it in social systems.

Systems thinking implies the study of how individuals deal with groups, how groups of different sizes operate as social constructs, and how those groups operate together, and how those groups operate with technological systems. It highlights the feedback loops between the different groups or sets of technology.

One strategy advocated in change research (Senge) is to make the problem go away temporarily, however this was not possible with the mandate to teach online due to COVID. And neither was the strategy to let the goal to teach online slip. There was no other possibility than teaching online or cancel teaching.

Another process recommended is to go to the heart of the problem but that takes time, so that it was easier to use a temporary fix. In our situation the temporary fix was to hire some additional staff to help out, in fact quite a number of them. As noted in change theory, this caused a side reinforcing process that adversely affected the ability to find a better long-term solution. In fact, there was no visible impact of support provided by these people to instructors. In addition, these persons added to the financial burden of the unit.

It appeared that an attempt was made to shift the burden using balancing processes to affect the problems, another strategy advocated. Added technical support was provided in some cases. However, this did not fix the problems as some people did not start engaging with the technology themselves and as teaching moved from online to face to face several times nothing was achieved through that temporary help. Nevertheless, the strategy to shift the burden to Faculty members was a better idea by offering short course modules on technology in the classroom.

It appears that the strategy 'success to the successful' was used as some Faculty members were given more time to work on other projects and a lesser teaching load. This practice does not however fit within the goals of equity and inclusion of the unit. First, it appeared to be a reaction to the fact that some Faculty members had been given some administrative duty to lighten their online teaching burden, with additional demands made to administration and second, only relatively new Faculty members were appointed to these, not necessarily the best choices. There could be grievances filed on the choices made especially because there was no advertising for such positions. This could also spin into the 'tragedy', another process identified in change, that more and more people want to be in this kind of situation. Administration might not have seen it happen, but now in our

new workload agreement, we are requesting a half course teaching release for everyone to even the field, this is a direct outcome of decisions made.

In an attempt to reduce complexity in order to be able to process it (Luhmann, 1984), choices have to be made and some steps intended as solutions might fail. The authors (Senge; Luhmann) warn us that easy fixes can also cause long-term problems. Growth is also supposed to be somewhat controlled or limited through balancing cycles. It becomes more problematic if the balancing cycle involves shifting the burden. Researchers advocate more than one balancing loop to remain on the safe side.

Needless to say that during the pandemic, many valuable strategies went out the window and there appears to be a much greater crisis ahead of us.

Clearly, real systems are complex beyond description and the idea behind the proposed strategies had been to minimize the impact of change on people's lives. Today everyone is hanging by a thread. After the removal of mask mandates people expressed their relief and commented about the difficult times through which they went. More recently, the University, aware of the needs of personnel, has issued a recommendation for the maintenance of or for regaining wellbeing, to not use computers outside our work hours. The statement did not include the option of working less.

Thankfully, in higher education Faculty members' minds are mainly focused on student learning and research, however other areas were dealt with in a crisis management sort of way.

3. Discussion

Several findings from the analysis of the observational notes are centered around three main areas, namely time limitation, human cost and impact on instruction.

The first issue was due to the short time span for new implementations and hence no time for foresight. This encompasses consequences of trial and error, more administrative control, and uncertainty of outcomes with contradictory discourses been held.

Not only did instructors have to learn on their own how to use zoom, but they also had to adapt course delivery to the new modalities. Despite the fact that I had already engaged in reverse pedagogy for several years, translating the approach onto on-line still presented a number of challenges and trial and error.

In an attempt at providing support with technology, the administration grouped instructors into technology sessions with graduate students as instructors. These groupings were carried out by administration and there was a deliberate choice made for what members were included in different groups, which I found very offensive. Topics covered appeared to have been picked by the students, or so it was made to appear. These were mostly around using the platform administrators wanted instructors to use, on the Faculty Internet site, a platform that from my research did not present the advantages I was looking for. However, it allowed more control over discussion entries as courses were concerned on the part of the students and perhaps witnessed by administrators who had access. It probably was also an open forum for criticism of course content and instruction.

In addition, where these graduate student instructors were concerned, the offer to answer our questions and select topics for the following meeting, was not met with effective feedback. I had asked to find out about more features for the use of the whiteboard, and my question was never addressed so I ended up trying it all on my own which was also time consuming and required additional effort.

The meeting time had been set and in my case was very inconvenient, nevertheless as I hoped to gain some further insights, I bent over backwards to ensure I attended. Colleagues progressively opted out of the meeting series. No doubt were they made to feel just as I was feeling. In a friendly sort of way, the students appeared to want to impose some measures or else were limited in their knowledge, only dishing out what they knew.

Since there was no time for delay, as per Senge's recommendation, there could not have been more preventative thinking going on. Despite that, administration could have listed times for students' technological modules

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offered and since these were given on-line there were no limits as regards the numbers of people signing in to different workshops. Perhaps there also was duplication of effort if all the different student teams were delivering the same content to all the different instructor groups. Moreover, in such a context of dire need and high stress levels, it would have been beneficial if instructors could choose to attend the modules with people who delivered the instructions in a way compatible to their learning and other needs.

Moreover, in addition to the uncertainty of outcome already weighing heavily on everyone and despite the added pressures, administration still imposed course end evaluations by students.

Added to that, as a second major problem, there was a human cost that far exceeded what would normally be the case. For instance academic colleagues quitting or retiring early, unevenness in support provided, isolation in some cases compared to overabundance of support in others, perhaps even favoritism.

A substantial number of mix-ups resulted from decisions made and where some requests for accommodations were supported others were denied.

Two valued colleagues quit last year as they felt overwhelmed by added demands and the lack of support provided. Support personnel also left. A retirement party we organized included nine people leaving whereas normally only two to three retire per year. In most cases people felt overwhelmed or not supported. Wellness support measures were attempted, however these mostly consisted of meetings without follow-up. The latest decision made was directing University members not to access their computers during off hours. There is so much demand on our time by meetings and other responsibilities during regular hours that it is close to impossible not to work on research projects and publications during uninterrupted times. As well, our graduate students request our time when they feel they need us. Not responding to them in a timely fashion is always frowned upon. With all these endeavors people feel caught between a rock and a hard place, not knowing what to do.

There was no easing-up on responsibilities, and it appeared that measures taken were more in the spirit of divide and conquer rather than providing support and warmth. When colleagues reached out to me, they shared their concerns and were looking for emotional support. Most of my experienced colleagues already had a full plate and additional expectations from administration added to their burden.

The Faculty union administration was not effective at supporting some members, it actually sounded that they got railroaded by a certain group of which members were a majority on the union administration. I felt personally harassed at times by the very people who were supposed to support me and mostly my requests ignored and put on the back burner.

A sizeable number of new staff members were hired, it is however unclear where they are and what they are doing. Therefore, it appears that staff is mainly supporting administration, yet their presence is not felt by ways of easing demands on Faculty members at large. No one has offered me more help in any area. Everything now has been moved on-line, including budget request, health claims, all other personal data access, anything having to do with research grants, course postings etc. I am required to do it all by myself and yet there are these new staff helpers available to someone somewhere in our unit.

Moreover, there is definite unevenness in support. Some new colleagues appear to have been given exceptional favorable working conditions with added administrative components and course release. Three more assistant dean positions were created and given to new Faculty members. There was no announcement for these positions nor were there competitions and interviews. On the other hand, buzz words like equity, diversity, inclusion among a few others are claimed to constitute the fabric of our university context. People have never been more divided as was acknowledged by colleagues of the Good and Welfare committee who are trying to do something about it. However, their requests for input from administration as to guidance regarding where to intervene has been met only with silence.

Interactions with colleagues became minimal and the lack of this socializing aspects took a toll on everyone, especially people without a family.

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In addition, some special 'support' positions were created, but it appears that these only alleviated some people's workloads and in fact no significant help was noticed due to their creation, at least not in my direction.

The third major observation pointed to consequences on the instructional context. In this case, a number of positive outcomes were noted.

As in my teaching approach I already had used a flipped classroom approach, it was relatively easy to switch over to online teaching, as the students had a list of and links to all instructional materials to be prepared ahead of every class meeting. Without time and effort put on getting ready to come to class, as some students were seen on their beds and in pajamas during zoom meetings, they could redirect their effort to more constructive elements for improved learning. Some students kept their cameras off during whole class meetings. Nevertheless, during breakout room work, video cameras were put on, regardless of the situational contexts the students were in, this indicated the comfort level reached within the groups. As well, time saving elements were afforded the instructor, I developed the courses further to place more effort on student engagement and learning (Renninger & Hidi, 2016), and it was all made visible. Students were asked to provide a list of three things they learned, two questions or new things they wanted to know and one innovative idea.

More activities were devised based on gaming strategies. Assessment had to be more innovative as it was somewhat more difficult to really judge everyone's capabilities through group work in breakout rooms mostly. As well, as group assignments constituted most of the work to be handed in as initially described in the syllabus, there was little space for individual work to have an impact on overall final grading. I added points for creativity when students thought of new ideas and approaches, and for originality, if the students created with a unique style and produced something with a new twist. Some students did not understand that they could be creative but were not original. They conflated the two meanings, which caused difficulties in a few cases. Although the new trend in Ministry of Education guidelines is toward collaboration in group assignments, it appeared that in some cases only the cooperation model was used which in a way defeated the purpose of the intention of creating a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)

A better feel for knowledge integration was possible due to on-line learning for students who put some effort into it. In fact, during breakout room activities, they asked each other questions for clarification and both those who asked and more so those who tried to provide explanations increased their learning, in the latter case through a deeper anchoring of concepts.

Some observations however led to drawing conflicting conclusions. Without the socializing component before and after classes as was the case during face-to-face meetings, students sometimes used class time to divert from the topics under scrutiny. This was noticed upon entering breakout rooms when the discussion stopped. However, in several cases students connected discussion topics to their own experiences during their school practicum placements, a good way to connect theory to praxis.

Participation in group work in breakout rooms had to be modified to require a product each time. In addition, each breakout room session had to be devised to make it more interesting. Thus, very active participation yielded excellent output.

Overall, group work for assignments was very effective and results were often superior. For individual work, although results were overall excellent there were some discrepancies and especially two cases of students who were procrastinating continuously but finally handed in superior work. It is possible that through the on-line work, they were able to glean more information over time and as a result when they finally completed their work they could include more of the instructor's feedback given on previously graded assignments. Student maturity also had a role to play in this as well as calculated decision-making.

4. Conclusion

It is clear that there were shifts in behaviors and adaptations to the new conditions, unfortunately with some still in the making and prevailing uncertainty.

We are still in a process of moving past the crisis. Overall unfortunately what we were witnessing post COVID corresponded to unwell, unhappy and demotivated employees, collective stress and a toxic environment, with

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still static thinking exemplified, some rigid planning and processes still in place, top-down structures, silos, destructive internal competition and the self-serving syndrome being prevalent.

Active on-going support was needed for everyone around a change mind-set, those who did not get sufficient support could not cope and were left behind.

At all levels problem solving had to be fast. In fact, administrators used to crisis management had an advantage this time in these situations.

Nevertheless, it would be better for all concerned if instead of proceeding with a crisis management model, administration would learn to draw a larger and clearer picture of the workings of the organism that our Faculty is, but until now it doesn't look like they found the right pencil. I am at a Faculty of Education, already a 'learning organization' and there are attempts at letting some people expand their capacity on an on-going basis, in order to achieve their vision. Faculty level success does not need to create externalized complexities as sometimes appears to be the case, and it seems that present trends are of a more positive nature, with a coming together of minds (Olson, 2003). Increased sensitization during the difficult times while teaching online and being rather isolated seems to have created a culture of commitment to each other as Faculty members. We observed shifts in mindset, identified control patterns, and merged into a tighter, more congenial community of practice (Lave and Wenger, Wenger).

Despite all hurdles as far as instruction was concerned, the changes brought about some very positive outcomes. There was more transparency and all processes could be scrutinized more openly as one could not use the socializing often handy during in-person meetings, hence on-line teaching helped create a positive atmosphere to smooth over some other aspects with sometimes difficult questions been addressed.

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