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Eyewitnesses to the Suddenly Online Paradigm Shift in Education: Perspectives on the Experience, Sustaining Effective Teaching and Learning, and Forecasts for the Future

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FALL 2020

SPECIAL ISSUE

The eLearning Literacy for Suddenly Online -
Voices from the Field

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**The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field**

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Table of Contents

Special Acknowledgements.....	4
Eyewitnesses to the Suddenly Online Paradigm Shift in Education: Perspectives on the Experience, Sustaining Effective Teaching and Learning, and Forecasts for the Future.....	5
Credo for Ethical Distance Learning	14
Suddenly...Technologically Literate: The Need for A Capabilities Approach.....	29
From Survive to Thrive: Using Professional Development to Advance Online Teaching	44
Leveraging Sociomaterial Practices to Build eLearning Literacy in “Suddenly Online” Professional Development	59
Suddenly Online Professional Development Pedagogy: End-of-Semester Showcasing in GameJolt and Animal Crossing: New Horizons	82

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**Eyewitnesses to the Suddenly Online Paradigm Shift in Education:
Perspectives on the Experience, Sustaining Effective Teaching and
Learning, and Forecasts for the Future**

Article Info	Abstract
Robert C. Chandler, Ph.D. Lipscomb University	Introducing this special issue of the Journal of Literacy and Technology, the second part of the two-part special issues focusing on the COVID-19 “suddenly online” transition to remote/virtual eLearning modalities during the Spring of 2020. This article introduces the emergency voices from the field arising from the COVID-19 “suddenly online” transition to remote/virtual eLearning modalities during the Spring of 2020. This rare, and perhaps “once in a lifetime” momentous COVID-19 pandemic induced a paradigmatic shift in teaching and learning modalities. The first-hand eyewitness accounts which emerged from the turbulent months of the “suddenly online” transition in education are important to capture direct reports from participant observers of the experience. That in this case, many of these participant-observers are also trained educators, academic researchers, and able to provide meta-perspectives on those experiences makes recollections, reports, and perspectives even more remarkable and essential.
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Keywords: Suddenly Online, Pandemic, Wayfinders, Pedagogy, Social Inclusion, Engagement, Innovation, Problem-solving, Ethics	

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This issue of the *Journal of Literacy and Technology* is the second part of the two-part special series focusing on the COVID-19 “suddenly online” transition to remote/virtual eLearning modalities during the Spring of 2020. Dramatic and far-ranging seismic social and educational modality shifts such as the current rapid educational transitions offer us an opportunity to pause and listen to the observations and voices from those who survived (and some who thrived) amid such tumult. To stop and listen to the voices of those who went through this environment and who are able to offer some systematic way of organizing and contemplating such experiences is the first step in listing the important lessons learned and making specific action lists for moving forward to whatever comes next. But who should be listened to? This is an interesting question and one to which several propositions will appear. However you answer it, teaching-scholar wayfinders that were in the moment and providing guidance to students in unfamiliar territory certainly have a strong claim. “For these reasons, a timely special edition of JLT was proposed to contextualize eLearning literacy against the backdrop of authentic, at the moment research, observations, and recommendations.” (Wallace, Burton, Chandler, & Douglas, 2020, p.11). However, the size and speed of the process did not allow for the results of that undertaking to be fully capitalized upon and so with a small extension of time and effort the catalogue of first findings was able to be expanded in a second special edition of The Journal of Literacy and Technology.

Purpose of this Issue - Voices

In this volume, the various authors present a framed “snapshot” of perspectives and observations of this transition moment.

These were gleaned as the authors navigated various challenges of the great mass transition to eLearning and subsequently reflected upon it. The authors’ collective voices provide important insights into the opportunities and challenges of designing and implementing eLearning and online programs for educators, students, and administrators. This volume collects several different views of the historical paradigmatic shifting moment, possibly illustrating important lessons and promising strategies that may also usher in changes for the broader education arena.

Significance of the Suddenly Online Shift

There was a well-developed canon of theory, research, and best practices for online teaching which was in place prior to the pandemic of 2020. That canon guided choices made during the suddenly online experience. Aspects of achieving student engagement, motivating high performance, and assessing the quality of instruction were valuable foundations for the transformative period. For example, previous research suggests that multiple communication channels appear to be related to higher engagement and that positive student-student and instructor-student personal communication tend to be correlated with higher student engagement (Dixon, 2010). However, the wholescale social, family life, and academic context shifted in Spring 2020 - creating new variable dynamics of students and faculty - as well as closing some communication channels and modalities. What do positive teacher-student and student-student communication look like with large periods of asynchronous learning and synchronous sessions mediated by “lean media” or restricted videoconferencing technology? The significant transformation of teaching and learning context provide a warrant to consider what emergent new

The Journal of Literacy and Technology

Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

factors and variables have become more salient or relevant in the pandemic and post-pandemic new normal.

The first volume of this two-issue series addressed the considerations of theory, research, and practices in light of the newly changed circumstances. This issue focuses on the eyewitness accounts, participant-observer case studies, and voices from the field experiencing that transformation.

In the Midst of Disruption

The fast-paced contingency switch to online and remote instruction in the spring of 2020 was a situation or state of confused movement and turmoil for teachers, students, parents, and administrators. In almost every instance, this transition was undertaken without an advance plan of how it would be accomplished, how the methods and curriculum would be designed, or how best to take possible future events, constraints, or circumstances into account. Furthermore, this was all undertaken amid anxiety and fear about health and safety, economic uncertainty, and confusion about both risks and mitigation methods.

It is useful to note the scale and speed of this transition. Faculty members had to change how they taught (and change quickly) and, for many of them, to change the modes and methods which they had not been previously prepared to operate with. Institutions rushed forward with rapid professional development and acquired and deployed (sometimes at great cost) new technology and connectivity tools to replace brick and mortar classrooms. Some students, including many who had been thriving in face-to-face learning settings, struggled with the eLearning context shift. Other students found themselves confronting heretofore unseen barriers of access, social

relationships, and skillsets needed to succeed in the new domain for which they were not fully prepared. As education institutions look to the coming academic years, they are actively working to prepare for success in a high uncertainty context and seeking to best thrive in this “new normal” education landscape. This volume seeks to capture how the experience of changed teaching/learning environment context from face to face modality to suddenly online or virtual eLearning modes were experienced by students, teachers, administrators, institutions, and other key constituents of the academy.

Where Are We?

Prepandemic research certainly provides a number of foundational characteristics that can be used in terms of relevance and possible consideration. The technology acceptance model (e.g. Davis, 1989) and others have provided several elements that can be considered. Setting content aside, Ghazinoory, & Afshari-Mofrad (2012), evaluate a few elements. Inherent applications seem relevant, but it is the implementation of these elements that provide difficulty. These elements include: support; ease of use; computer self-efficacy (cse); culture; reliability; and the use of experts (especially in course design). However, other elements such as perceived satisfaction, efficiency and playfulness have also been associated with buy-in (Estriegana, Medina-Merodio, & Barchino, 2019). Few systems have all the above elements, and indeed, they challenge even the most well-designed systems implemented in the most highly funded learning systems. However, they provide a context in which to look at the deficiencies inherent in the pandemic context. They also provide a lens in which to view the workarounds that the current set of

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

wayfinders present, as well as the effectiveness and efficiencies of such applications.

Voices From An Educational Maelstrom

So, what is presented are the authors various “front-line” experiential reports – capturing a real-time sense of the transition moment that may be useful to help chart pathways forward. This includes reports of key variables such as satisfaction, social inclusion, engagement, innovation, problem-solving, and ethical dimensions experienced during the “suddenly online” context.

Descriptions of the transition from physicality to virtual “spaces and places” and the implications of that shift on how teaching/learning was experienced is considered from the vantage point of preparation (training), assessment methods, user friendly/unfriendly tools, as well as essential skills and competencies required. Also, the challenges of technical skill acquisition and gaps in training effectiveness for both teachers and students in the suddenly online transition period are reported. Furthermore, these firsthand reports include self-observations, reflective contemplation, and summaries of emerging issues such as inequities and disparities in access to technology, digital (technological) literacy, and requisite technical and social interaction skills in both instructors and students.

Finally, these voices tell us of hurriedly updated metrics for what constitutes “high quality” in terms of teaching during the suddenly online context which offer some implications for longer term metrics of subsequent eLearning applications for all of us. These include reported emerging norms characterized as “best practices” specific goals and priorities for effective and interactive online teaching/learning environments. These

voices from the field provide us guidance and suggestions for navigating the coming challenges and repercussions emerging from the suddenly online experience that could benefit educators and students alike in the “new normal” eLearning environment of the coming academic years. For now, the most important next step is for all of us to listen to the voices of those who share their experiences of this sea change moment in education with all of us.

However, Mollenkopf & Gaskill (2020) provided a prescient warning in regard to findings found in the heat of the initial pandemic modality shift.

“This is not necessarily a reflection that students actually learned more, but it may have been related to the combination of supports, flexibility, and a student reaction to simply wanting to “outwit the virus”, which may not hold true under future semesters impacted by “COVID-fatigue.” p. 145

To this end, each of the authors was given a chance to provide a postscript in early October of possible lessons learned or updates that they provided in the article that was functionally written before the fall 2020 semester really started.

Observations from the Suddenly Online Chorus

In classical Athenian drama, the actors and singers who commented directly to the audience on the action occurring on stage of the play were called the chorus. These were typically both characters within the narrative as well as “third-party” observers who reported directly to the audience as a means of contextualizing, providing insights into the other characters and occasionally even as critics. In some instances, the chorus could even be

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

considered the featured players in a tragedy or comedy performance. Considering the voices from the field in this issue as collectively representing a type of “chorus” from the context of the dramatic pandemic necessitated “suddenly online” experience, we turn our attention to their observations, insights, and critique to better understand what transpired.

Charron and Fuss-Reineck (2020) report a qualitative study seeking to articulate a student & faculty driven ethical credo that can be used to promote a successful learning community within the digital classroom. The first phase of the research focused on students’ reported experience as online learners. A thematic analysis is used to identify core ethical principles and associated behaviors found to promote virtual community and learning. The results are experience-based insights encapsulated in the *Credo for Ethical Distance Learning*. The second phase of this research extended the Credo for Ethical Distance Learning to the instructors’ reported experiences in teaching online. Faculty perspectives were used to create a supplemental *Credo for Ethical Distance Learning: Faculty Implications*. These emergent results can provide strategies to help develop better interactive online learning environments. Charron, and Fuss-Reineck argue that the credo can promote awareness about communication ethics and its impact on virtual learning.

Cunningham (2020) reports that technological literacy is integrated in various degrees in K-12 schools in the U.S. Technological literacy assesses how students understand technological concepts, adapt to technological change, and encourages them to participate in civic discussions about these changes. The sudden shift to online learning in the spring of 2020 highlighted

the importance of continuing these efforts. These findings suggest that many students not only lacked access to computers and the Internet, but they also lacked technological literacy skills to effectively navigate online courses. As schools move to more sustained levels of online learning, Cunningham argues for a capabilities approach to technological literacy that emphasizes individual development.

Ibrahim (2020) reports a case study of the implementation and adaptation of a “Professional Development Framework” for online teaching training and support for faculty as they rapidly moved to online teaching in a “suddenly online” transition. Using this framework, a college wide faculty team worked to develop interactive online teaching training, including: activities to practice skills; assessments to demonstrate competency; community support groups organized by type of class; and organizational support including a standardized syllabus, Canvas template, and support from technology specialists. This study also demonstrates promise for a systematic approach to ongoing faculty development outside of moments of crisis. The experience also suggests that an important supplement to teacher training is the need for development and implementation of parallel online learning training for students, more opportunities for assessment, and recognition of high-quality online teaching with meaningful uses of technology.

Lohman (2020) also reports on professional development and eLearning literacy aspects which arose amid the “suddenly online” experience. Finding that much technology training involves staff teaching faculty, but also finding that faculty often use informal peer networks and choose technologies independently in ways that

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

may hinder eLearning literacy. A case study of a “suddenly online” course design institute provided an opportunity to explore how a thoughtfully designed, responsive professional development method which incorporated peer support could foster faculty eLearning literacy. Synthesizing participants’ feedback and assessment insights along with the designer-facilitator’s observations (and reviewing secondary literature) confirms the importance of peer support, integration of technology with design principles, and reflective activities in this “suddenly online” professional development. Further, Lohman argues that sociomaterial practices, such as peer learning, serve as assets in a holistic view of eLearning literacy. Treating skills, habits of mind, and situated practices as all essential to eLearning literacy, this article demonstrates that faculty preferences such as peer learning need not be considered hindrances but rather can be viewed as resources to be leveraged through thoughtful, responsive design to build organizational capacity to support effective online or “suddenly online” learning.

Totten (2020) reports the experiences with the cancellation of the semester showcase for the “Game Prototyping and Animation and Game Design Senior Capstone” courses at Kent State University. Totten points out that this transition fundamentally changed these courses’ pedagogy. Since this traditionally face to face course is an important opportunity for students to practice vital professional skills, such as displaying and promoting work to audiences, with instructors grading students on how they manage these tasks it is a significant part of student learning and assessment feedback. The shift to “suddenly-online” meant potentially losing both practice and assessment in courses that otherwise emphasize professional

development. Totten describes how the capstone courses were adapted to the new all-digital reality through platform case studies, using industry best-practices for marketing and event organization norms. Students and faculty organized BlatherCade, an online game event that used GameJolt, a digital marketplace for independent games, and the Nintendo Switch game Animal Crossing: New Horizons. Totten provides an assessment of the event, highlighting challenges and successes of working with these platforms, and suggests best-practices for future applications of this approach.

Emergent Themes from the Suddenly Online Chorus

There are several themes emerging from these eyewitness accounts of the suddenly online experience. Several themes are noteworthy. First, these case studies provide confirmation that aspects of teaching and learning during and after the transition were significantly different, for both teachers and students as well as academic institutions, during the suddenly online transition. Any presumption that the education process remained mostly unaffected by the switch to widespread eLearning modality appears to have been dispelled. The changed factors and variables of learning can appropriately be seen in the context of a paradigmatic shift of expectations and environment. There is a corresponding need to adjust and create our assumptions, methods, models, and best practices for teaching in the eLearning environment going forward. Furthermore, it should be noted that these case studies attest to the ubiquitous urgency all across the educational landscape of the search to better explore online educational tools, methods and best practices because of the pandemic suddenly online experience.

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

Second, despite some opinions that viewed the suddenly online transition negatively and revealed serious failures in the teaching and learning processes (e.g. Rosenfeld, 2020), these case studies suggest that the transition may have been more successful and effective than is commonly thought. Taken together, these reports suggest that there were positive results achieved during a challenging and difficult period of rapid adjustment. This includes efforts to hurriedly prepare faculty, implement technological tools, and reinvent curriculum, content, and teaching/learning methods. This general sense of positive results achieved despite the challenges may be one of the most encouraging themes to emerge from these reports. These reported efforts reveal that there was evidence of strong resilience among teachers, students, and staff in the midst of very trying circumstances.

Third, the themes of emerging and now recognized areas on which we should focus for further improvement as we move forward. Cunningham's findings, for example, suggests that a capabilities approach to eLearning literacy which emphasizes individual development models can be beneficial. Ibrahim and Lohman each point us towards the importance of adaptive professional development of online teaching skills and methods for enhancing effectiveness of teachers (and students). Perhaps this is one of the “new normal” implications of the paradigmatic shift in eLearning overall. It is clear that our methods, assumptions, and preparation for teaching and learning must adapt and adjust to changed circumstances in the context of online and eLearning modalities.

There is a clear need for updating effective professional training for educators to develop the knowledge and skills they

need to address the newfound challenges in the online teaching and learning context. Such training efforts may not be effective unless it enables teachers to improve their instruction or adjust to the challenges of online education. Although it is important for providing training and support for all of those teaching online or virtually, it is especially critical for veteran teachers who have had to transition from their experiences in the old normal to the new normal to have specialized, ongoing and regular opportunities for such training and support, as well as guided opportunities to learn from each other.

Fourth, we need to continue the process of considering all of the key aspects of the online eLearning model - notably the holistic perspectives of the instructors, students, institutional training and support as well the technological and media ecology of the context. Looking at aspects such as the impact of social community, relationships, self-perceptions, engagement, motivation, along with more recognized issues such as technology gaps, distraction, and information/content modality is essential. The authors in this issue address a number of these areas. For example, Lohman's (2020) findings call our attention to the need for an increased focus on skills, habits, and variables of eLearning literacy for both instructors and students. Cunningham (2020) found that many students not only lacked access to computers and the Internet, and they also lacked technological literacy skills to effectively navigate online courses. Charron, and Fuss-Reineck (2020) call attention to an ethics grounded approach by which to promote virtual community and learning in an online environment (focused on by instructors and students).

Fifth, the opportunities for virtual engagement may be greater than heretofore

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

imagined. Totten's (2020) case study findings, for example, may point us to exploring even more creative and "alternative" formats for achieving equifinality for online educational processes when compared to traditional face to face modalities. The social, emotional, and self-concept states influence how well students engage, participate, and learn in the virtual environment. A number of serious questions are raised. These include: how can teachers best incentivize student pre-class preparation; adapt flipped classroom models; motivate self-discipline and self-determination for asynchronous learning activities; and/or maximize the synchronous class sessions?

These observations can lead us to consider other innovative approaches (e.g. feedback loops, gamification, virtual experiential curriculum as well as advanced interdependent virtual instructional design, and much more). Since the technological genie has been let out of the bottle in terms of remote learning classes for face to face brick and mortar classroom constituencies, it seems highly unlikely it will not be called upon earlier and often as solutions to pedagogical "reach" issues.

Finally, even with these eyewitness case studies and insightful analysis, there is a vast gap in our knowledge about the new normal online learning environment, the cumulative and interactive impacts of social changes, and the impact of technology and virtual interaction. Much more research and analysis need to be undertaken. Various aspects should be investigated and explored including variables such as; technological determinism, media ecology, curriculum design and format, motivation, cognitive and affective dimensions, roles, perspectives, virtual spaces, climate, structures, flexibility and adaptability, collaboration, synchronous

and asynchronous factors, dependence, interdependence, inclusion, knowledge and technological equity, cultural and community differentials, the impact of interfaces and Interactions, as well as access issues inherent in many of those elements mentioned earlier.

Future Research and Scholarship

These accounts and case studies emerging from the turbulent months of the "suddenly online" transition in education are important voices from the chorus of those who both participated and assessed the suddenly online efforts to transition to eLearning. Again, this collection of the scholarship is all the more remarkable and essential, given the timeliness of its' creation. These articles serve as a time capsule of what happened, an assessment of what worked, what did not work, and provide the first in a sequence of roadmaps that point to a more compelling future of eLearning's coming years. Scholarship must determine what kind of footing the articles provide. Do the setbacks, failures, and barriers experiences provided better footing moving forward? Do they provide entry into inextricable complexity quicksand that neither frees the participant nor betters education? Which question is most applicable? It is here where the "chorus" of future scholarship must step in and comment on whether the wayfinders journey was one of comedy or tragedy. Regardless, the editors of this journal applaud their journey.

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Voices from the Field

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

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