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## Research Article

### Transformative Learning in the Online Classroom: A Marketing Educator's Autoethnographic Account

Raymond Allan G. Vergara\*

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

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#### \*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

[raymond.vergara@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:raymond.vergara@dlsu.edu.ph)

#### ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic account is a critical reflection on my experience teaching online classes during the pandemic. It is a narrative of my transformation through the 28 months of teaching events marketing courses through the online distance learning modality. I learned that as a marketing educator, my role is to help students develop positive perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors about learning by providing the conditions conducive for a meaningful learning experience. However, as an educator, a student's learning experience is not my sole responsibility because the learning experience is co-created with the student. My role as an educator is to provide them with opportunities, tools, and knowledge to help them make the most out of their learning experience.

**Keywords:** *Event marketing education, Transformational learning, Transformational teaching*

#### Introduction

My focus as a marketing educator is in developing competence in students. This entails developing skills and equipping students with relevant knowledge about the field. This was how I was trained, and this is how I learned my craft. However, after going through a pandemic and confronting situations and issues that challenged my long-held beliefs and practices, I slowly realized that I needed to change how I saw, felt about, and approached teaching and learning.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I saw an opportunity to develop as a marketing educator by conducting action research in the courses I taught online with the objective of

understanding how to improve how I teach and how to deliver a transformative learning experience in the online setting (Vergara, 2021; Vergara, 2022). Writing this autoethnography is my attempt at reflecting on how my perspectives, attitudes, and behavior as an educator changed while teaching classes online for two years during the pandemic.

#### Rationale

The goal of action research is to build theory and enhance practice (Rod, 2011). Critical reflection is a necessary step in the action research process. Autoethnography complements action research because it lends to

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research with a unique perspective on the context being studied. In this case, because I am actively involved in the research process and the context action, the subject of this research, my autoethnographic account provides opportunities for reflexivity.

There is a lot of learning opportunity in examining how educators themselves are transformed. When I applied for a grant to conduct the action research, the review committee commented that my research was focused on student transformation and noted the importance of being open to my own transformation as an educator and a learner myself. This changed my own perspective about transformational learning and what it means to be transformed. It also shifted how I viewed my role in the action research—I am not merely an observer and researcher, but I am, as well, an active participant and practitioner.

Furthermore, while theory can explain why a phenomenon such as transformation occurs, it does not capture how transformation occurs because “a change in consciousness is difficult to quantify” (Barley & Southcott, 2019). Transformative learning literature often focus on ascertaining whether a change occurs and explaining what causes this change, but rarely does it provide a nuanced description of the transformation. Herein lies the opportunity, to understand how perspectives change and how these perspectives influence the change in attitudes and behavior.

There is value in capturing an educator's transformation. While an autoethnographic account may not be generalized for the general population, it may resonate with others and trigger reflection (Barley & Southcott, 2019). It may lead others, more specifically fellow educators, to examine their beliefs and practices, how these may have transformed, and how the transformation occurred. Reflecting on an educator's beliefs and practice benefits both the educator and students, particularly since educator characteristics, disposition, and teaching styles (Rong-Da Liang, 2021; Kirillova & Au, 2020) and the quality of educator-student relationships in the classroom (Syrdal et al., 2023; Granitz et al., 2009) impact learning outcomes.

There is also value in retrospective introspection in research. The retrospective

introspection of experiences contributes to both theory building and enhancing practice (Rod, 2011). While the results of my research have been published, it lacks nuanced examination of the transformative learning I experienced as an educator through my role as an active observer and participant of my students' learning experience. Revisiting my experiences and writing them down as an autoethnographic account furthers personal learning because it allows me to examine the experience at a different time and place (McKenna, 2007) providing me with a layer of objectivity to view the experience. The process allows me to “peel back of multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs” (Boyle & Parry, 2007) that I may have failed to consider, explore, or examine in the initial run of the action research. Furthermore, because I am more focused on examining the experience for what it is, it frees me from factors that constrained me, such as the need to satisfy the research grant committee (Rod, 2011). Most importantly, a retrospective introspection is vital in understanding the transformation of perspectives, behavior, and attitudes because it allows one to look back, reflect, and examine the “evolution of consciousness” (Barley & Southcott, 2019).

## Methods

This autoethnographic account is a critical reflection on my experience teaching online classes during the pandemic. It is a retrospective introspection based on my memory, a legitimate aspect of writing an autoethnographic account (Barley & Southcott, 2019). While recollections are potentially susceptible to mental lapses, they may be supported by relevant historical materials, such as “memoirs, memorabilia, and mementos of various kinds” to enhance their trustworthiness (Holbrook, 2005). These mementos can take the form of the case study journal (Rod, 2011). To support and enhance the integrity of my memory, I use my research journals, relevant social media posts, and communication in the class social media group page.

This autoethnographic account follows Barley and Southcott's (Barley & Southcott, 2019) autoethnographic approach of recounting stories or vignettes that influenced my

transformation. While her autoethnography spans decades, beginning from when she was a child, my own autoethnography tracks the 28 months I taught courses through the online distance learning (ODL) modality, beginning in March 2020 when the pandemic broke out until July 2022, the last term that I taught a fully online class. I recount these stories in a chronological order, which provides several advantages. One, it helps me recall better as retracing steps provides a systematic approach to memory recollection. It also helps tell the story of transformation better, since it tracks not only my experience but also the changes in my assumptions, thoughts, questions, and emotions. My account focuses on four main questions, where they apply:

1. What were my circumstances?
2. How did I approach my circumstances?
3. How did I feel?
4. What did I learn?

## **Stories and lessons learned from the trenches**

### **(1) First four months: pivoting and preparing for change**

*What were my circumstances?*

The WHO officially declared Covid-19 a pandemic in March 2020. The Philippine government soon after announced a community quarantine, which suspended classes in physical classrooms. The university called on faculty to quickly pivot from onsite learning to delivering classes online until the conclusion of the extended term. Nobody knew at that time that the transition to online learning would last for longer than the term.

It was a difficult transition, because it was abrupt, and we faced many uncertainties. Communicating with students became difficult, too. We communicated through a social media group page since we have not fully explored the university's learning management system. The students were concerned with their own personal struggles as the pandemic impacts all aspects of life.

Initially, I did not understand how to pivot and change the course requirements to suit the sudden shifts. Given the challenges we—my students and I—I decided to consolidate the remaining course requirements into a single

project requirement for all three of my classes to work on. The objective became simple: use event marketing principles they have learned in the course to execute a campaign to help the medical frontliners by providing them with personal protective equipment (PPEs). What resulted was a successful crowdfunding and crowdsourcing campaign that brought together private donors, organizations, local brands, and PPE suppliers to help deliver masks, face shields, food, and other necessities to medical and logistical frontliners.

It was also during this time that the university announced that it would shift to ODL in the succeeding terms and encouraged faculty to plan and prepare for the transition into ODL. I used my experience in the first two months of teaching online as the basis for how I planned and prepared for this learning modality shift.

*How did I prepare for the transition to ODL?*

The university postponed the beginning of the succeeding term, giving faculty members at least two months to prepare for the shift. I prioritized my preparations based on the importance of my concerns.

My primary concern was how to create a conducive learning environment for all learners. In an online learning environment, we lose the four physical walls of the classroom, which democratizes the learning experience. In its place is a small screen where students sit and “watch” a teacher lecture in class. Where students sit and watch also differs. In the early months of the pandemic, many students were forced to stay home because of strict quarantines. Unfortunately, not all homes are conducive to learning. Access to technology, including Internet connection and gadgets, varies among students. Since the learning experience is dependent on student's access to technology and the physical space where they will attend the classes online, there was very little about the learning environment I could control in the absence of the four walls of the classroom. More importantly, with the uncertainty caused by the pandemic impacting all aspects of life, I expected students to face many worries that would influence their class performance. I expected some students to find attending class more challenging than others.

To address this concern, I reduced the course requirements from five activities to three challenge-based activities. The activities were designed to be incrementally more challenging than the other. Each activity helped develop skills and knowledge that the students need for the succeeding activity. For the first ODL iteration of the course, the students were asked to attend an online event and provide feedback in the form of a video log or vlog. The first activity's objective is to give them the experience of attending an online event to help them understand what it means to design and deliver a guest experience. For the second project, a midterm requirement, students are asked to produce their own online event based on a theme I conceptualized. This event is attended by cohorts of the course. The last and final requirement is also a group project where students are asked to conceptualize, promote, and activate an online event.

In the decade that I have been teaching events marketing, I have learned that the students looked forward to and enjoyed the challenge-based activities the most. The activities take advantage of the benefits of collaborative learning, allowing students to learn with their peers by solving problems, experimenting, and learning from mistakes. It also provides students with many opportunities for engagement. The students also value the autonomy I provide. They are allowed to choose who to work with and what project they work on, as long as they fulfill the learning criteria.

I also created new learning materials, specifically short videos that ranged from five to 15 minutes, which featured events professionals discussing how they apply events marketing principles in their field. I also made sure that I maximized the use of the school's learning management system, taking the time to upload all relevant learning materials for students to access and use to help them through the course. I understood that some students will find it challenging to attend synchronous classes, so I made sure that they have access to learning materials and videos that they can refer to should attending classes be an issue.

Secondly, I was concerned about how I could engage students because of the communication challenges I experienced in the

previous term. This is why I created a communication structure that considered the different types of communication: official announcements, student consultations, and spontaneous conversations that mimicked the casual campus conversations during onsite classes. My main objective was to make sure that students would know how to reach out should they need to consult with me or seek my assistance.

Furthermore, I was concerned about the relevance of what I will teach, given that events marketing was changing because of the pandemic, and how I will teach, given that learning modality needed to change. In prioritizing which concepts and themes I discussed, I made sure that I focused only on the most relevant. However, just as it was in previous classes, I planned all my lectures to be delivered through storytelling.

Finally, I wanted to learn more about ODL and how I could enhance the students' learning experience. I researched on teaching best practices, particularly transformative teaching styles. To understand how these styles affect the learning experience, I designed action research to help me enhance my students' learning experience.

#### *How did I feel?*

I felt uncertain and wondering whether I had the correct assumptions and whether I prepared enough for the students. I decided to take things one day at a time and focus on the things that I could control. However, I was also excited to learn from the experience because of the desire to become a better teacher.

### **(2) Next 15 months: transformation of practice**

#### *What were my circumstances?*

Some of my concerns manifested when I started teaching online. Access to technology, particularly in the first year of teaching online, became a significant factor in the learning experience. For example, I experienced intermittent connectivity, which affected the quality of my audio. In many instances, my students would call my attention to let me know that they could not hear me well. It was also normal for my students to experience an intermittent connection, making it difficult for them to

follow the class. As a result, it became the norm for students to turn their cameras off during synchronous online classes.

Students are also asked to mute their microphones to minimize disruptions. We learned early on that the ambient noise from students' locations can disrupt a class. In the first two terms of ODL, many of my students were disrupted by parents, siblings, and other housemates, unaware that the student was attending class. Since I am also a parent of small children, I, too, was disrupted many times by my own children while delivering lectures or during class consultations.

It was difficult to compartmentalize life during the first year of the pandemic, while everyone was forced to stay indoors. Living during the pandemic meant that we lived, worked, played, and rested indoors. I also had difficulty compartmentalizing time as well as the routine I kept pre-pandemic no longer worked. The quarantine has altered my sense of time, just as others have felt (Ogden, 2020), as I tried my best to make things work as both family life and work life occupied the same space. I felt that I was adjusting to everything all at once, especially as I was also helping the other members of my household adjust to this new normal. Staying indoors also meant that many of the activities that I enjoyed, which helped me manage the stress of teaching.

What I missed the most from the traditional face-to-face classes is engagement and immediate feedback from learners. In ODL, gone are the non-verbal cues and feedback that inform me about what they think about the lectures—whether it is boring or interesting for them. Since I do not see the faces of my students, I do not get any feedback. Without seeing their faces, I cannot tell whether they are confused, or whether they need more information or assistance. In face-to-face classes, students instinctively ask questions or share their opinion in the middle of lectures or consultations. In ODL, students either send questions through chat or use the “raise your hand” option on Zoom. In the first few terms, students would gamely share stories of their own. However, I observed that students participated less and less the longer we held classes online.

The only time I would receive feedback is at the conclusion of the term after students have filled out the post-class assessment survey. The survey results from the classes I taught in the first 15 months of ODL showed that, in general, students found the storytelling lectures and challenged-based project requirements engaging and impactful. They also showed that they enjoyed participating in class, found meaning in the stories and projects, and were engaged in the course. The students valued the opportunities of engagement, particularly the opportunities for them to work with and interact with peers. They informed me that there are rarely opportunities for these in their other courses.

Many students surprised me with their course performance, particularly in the challenge-based projects. The students were creative in their use of technology, maximizing apps and tools to help them conceptualize and activate engaging events that their peers enjoyed. I learned from my students and discovered many other ways of engaging event guests and audience members.

#### *How did I approach my circumstances?*

The results of the survey, my observations, and my experience inform me on how to continually adjust the course to suit learner needs in ODL. I adjusted my storytelling lectures, took out the lessons and materials that are no longer relevant and replaced them with updated ones. I also adjusted the individual project requirements to suit evolving needs and issues in the class. In the first couple of terms, the individual requirements focused on introducing online events to students, which was no longer relevant in the succeeding terms as it became more common for students to attend online events. My individual requirements would continue to change, but the objectives for the first assignment remained the same: to develop skills and knowledge that would help students in their succeeding projects.

I also looked for ways for students to engage in lectures. Some initiatives worked, while others did not. For example, I challenged them to creatively interrupt the class through funny, quirky intermissions to add some fun and spontaneity in the class, similar how flash mobs gen-

erated interest. It was meant to challenge students to be creative and to understand program timing. Initially, students were enthusiastic and enjoyed these intermissions. However, this challenge lost its novelty or even relevance in the succeeding terms as it did not see it achieving the objectives that I thought it would. Sometimes it felt more disruptive than the creative outlet that I intended it to be. I stopped this exercise once it became clear that it was not enhancing the learning experience.

I also observed that maintaining focus is difficult in ODL. This is why I chose to limit the number of lectures in class. In the typical face-to-face classes, I would deliver 7 lectures in total. The rest of the term is reserved for preparation, collaboration, and execution of challenge-based requirements. In ODL, I reduced lectures to 4 sessions, and the rest of the term for consultations, independent learning activities, and project event activations. I felt that this allowed learners to focus on a few but important things, master the skills that they set out to develop, and still have time to interact and collaborate with their peers.

#### *How did I feel?*

I felt very enthusiastic and motivated to teach in the first year of ODL. I used the time to experiment and find out which techniques and tools worked, and which ones did not. I was very excited to see that my students were learning and were even motivated to participate and perform in class, despite the circumstances.

However, in the latter end of the first year, I also began to feel exhausted. There were many changes that occurred throughout the year. There was a time when the term had to be extended to provide students some leeway because of changes in quarantine guidelines, particularly when cases of Covid-19 surged. It was normal for plans to continually change.

I was beginning to feel isolated, despite my efforts to interact with and engage students. Particularly in the end of the first year, the conversations in class felt one-way. I actively sought out reactions, questions, and comments. It is rare for students to initiate conversations in class, despite encouraging students to engage and speak in class. I felt that building rapport in

an online setting was becoming increasingly challenging.

### **(3) Last 9 months: feeling depleted and exhausted**

#### *What were my circumstances?*

It became clear that students were finding it more and more difficult to focus in ODL, despite using techniques and tools that worked in the first year of teaching ODL. It was difficult to sustain their interest and they were honest to admit that they find it difficult to concentrate in class.

Students continued to enjoy storytelling lectures and looked forward to the challenge-based activities, but I observed that interactions and engagement is not as lively as it was in the first year. I had to work harder to motivate myself in the beginning of the class to sustain the energy for storytelling.

#### *How did I approach my circumstances?*

I continued to nurture learner autonomy and use transformative teaching techniques to build learner competence. I continued to reach out and check in with students when I could. However, I felt that it took more effort to get students engaged.

#### *How did I feel?*

I felt very exhausted and less enthusiastic with teaching. It was difficult to help motivate students, especially because they participated less and less in class. I felt conflicted. On one hand, I was ready to go back to the traditional classroom because I felt that engagement would improve if we all went back to the physical classroom. On the other hand, I felt I needed to take a break from continually adjusting to changing circumstances.

### **Discussion**

I saw teaching ODL during the pandemic as an opportunity to experience the value in collaborative learning, particularly in ODL. It taught me the different ways learners can collaborate, and that collaborative learning need not occur in the same physical space. Students are more likely to nurture affinity with their peers than they are with teachers, which enhances their learning when they do it together.

They are more likely to be honest about their learning gaps and their mistakes, which they work on addressing together through collaboration.

Collaboration also contributes to engagement. Some of my students informed me that one important consequence of attending my class was making friends. By working in groups and interacting with each other during the project events, they were able to get to know each other. I realized that many students, particularly those who entered the university during the pandemic, found it difficult to make friends within the university community. ODL does not provide many opportunities for students to meet others because students spent their breaks at home, instead of spending the time loitering around the campus. In ODL, serendipitous opportunities to make new friends did not exist.

I found it surprising to learn that students found my storytelling lectures impactful. Succeeding post-course surveys would confirm that students found these lectures fun, engaging, and meaningful. I was also pleasantly surprised to find out that some students wanted me to deliver more lectures in class. My lectures focused on the concept of experience. A popular lecture is the Disney guest experience; this is a lecture I give to introduce the concept of experience or customer experience. While not all students have visited a Disney Park, many of them can relate to the topic, and are particularly interested in how the brand creates excitement and leaves memorable experiences to its guests. I enjoyed and felt competent delivering storytelling lectures because of positive feedback from students, which encouraged me to find ways to improve the lectures. I felt that that sharing personal stories humanized me as a teacher. It allowed me to become approachable and relatable to students and helps nurture affinity.

I became more compassionate as an educator. I focused less on output quality and more on the learning process: "How can I make the student's learning experience fun, engaging and meaningful?" I focused less on making sure that students possessed the necessary knowledge and developed the necessary skills for event marketing and focused more on

developing positive attitudes towards learning. I cannot force someone who doesn't want to or is not motivated to learn. Instead, I can help someone become intrinsically motivated to learn, by giving students autonomy, developing their competence, and making them feel connected to something bigger than themselves.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

As an events marketing teacher, I consider learning as a fun, engaging, and meaningful experience. Initially, I formed this philosophy because of the subject matter deals with experiences. Event management is in the business of conceptualizing, designing, producing, and delivering experiences (Berridge, 2020). More broadly, experience is an important concept in marketing, thanks to the seminal work of Holbrook and Hirschman (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and Pine and Gilmore (Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

Prior to the pandemic, my primary focus was on teaching skills and imparting knowledge relevant to the events marketing and marketing field. I focused on results. Learning to me meant that students would be able to activate events that closely followed the principles I taught in class. This affected how I taught, how I provided feedback, and how I defined learner success. My objective was to help students realize that the fun, engagement, and meaning came from performing the work, specifically in conceptualizing, organizing, and activating events for the course.

This, however, changed while teaching during the pandemic and my objectives took on a larger perspective. What transformed in me while teaching during the pandemic was how I considered my role as an educator. My previous objectives were pragmatic and grounded on the work itself. While I do not see anything wrong in these objectives, I felt that as a marketing educator, I could further expand my focus from merely what students learned in my course but how they learned in general. I want my students to have fun, be highly engaged, and find meaning in the learning experience. I want them to develop positive perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors about learning. I wanted them to find and make meaning of what they have learned in the course—to personalize the

learning experience so that they retain what they have learned long after they have taken the course.

Just as I cannot force my students to learn when they do not want to, I also cannot force which principles and concepts they retain and apply in their lives. As an educator, however, I can provide the foundation for a meaningful learning experience. The learning experience is not my sole responsibility—it is co-created with the students. My role as an educator is to provide them with opportunities, tools, and knowledge to help them make the most out of their learning experience.

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