Interpreting Experiences of Teachers Using Online Technologies to Interact with Teachers in Blended Tertiary Environments: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT
This research made a phenomenological interpretation of key stakeholders’ experiences with educational online technologies (EOT), to determine their present EOT needs and challenges and provide a basis from which to propose methods for effective EOT support. It analysed the EOT experiences of 10 students and 10 teachers from New Zealand and Australia and interpreted the meanings of the phenomena through an abstraction of local and global themes. This paper is the fifth in a series of six publications that presents the local themes. It documents the interpretations of teachers’ experiences with other teachers, in reference to their use of two different types of EOTs: learning management systems (Blackboard), and online networking tools (Twitter and Facebook). These interpretations, which include descriptions of teachers’ EOT challenges, helped to inform a set of recommendations for effective EOT use, to assist institutes in their efforts to address EOT challenges and meet stakeholders’ needs.

KEYWORDS
Blended Learning, Online Technology, Phenomenology, Teacher Experiences, Tertiary Education

INTRODUCTION
Educational online technologies (EOTs) have universally transformed the delivery of higher education, creating exceptional opportunities for improved learning and teaching. In a period of rapid growth, their enhanced functionalities and affordances have revolutionised methods of instruction and engagement, engendering significant advances across the tertiary education sector. Traditional education spaces have evolved into interactive blended tertiary environments (BTEs), and channels of instruction have evolved from the type used in “traditional, face-to-face courses to … [that of] online courses” (Picciano, 2015, p. 148).

These digital transformations foreshadow thrilling prospects for teachers and students, the key stakeholders in BTEs. Predictions about online education suggest that virtual universities are the trends in the future of tertiary-level learning (Peppers, 2016), and as “the pace of change” rapidly progresses, “hybrid classes will proliferate” (Anderson, Boyles, & Rainie, 2012, p. 17). This is now happening, as “millions of students [take] online courses” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 21). Similar estimations suggest that the online delivery of coursework via web-based platforms will significantly change higher education (Anderson et al., 2012), and that in a globally “competitive environment”

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TEIs have no “other choice than to… [provide] online components,” “get smarter…doing more with less” and commit “to the nature of scale of the transformation” (Tuapawa, 2016b, p. 7).

Despite the astonishing growth and demand for online learning, significant obstacles impede the use of EOTs. Some of these challenges include attitudinal characteristics, insufficient design support (Panda & Mishra, 2007) and a “lack of training” or ineffective training (Merfert, 2016, p. 1). Others include time constraints, limited technology access, inefficient EOT usage, lack of motivation and unrealistic expectations (Tuapawa, 2016). These challenges pose an apparent risk to the future sustainability of blended spaces (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013) and inhibit stakeholders’ abilities to perform their roles efficiently.

Significant efforts have been made to better comprehend the nature of EOT challenges. Some contributions to the literature have centred on the integration of technologies into learning environments (Moore, 2013), the affordances and effectiveness of technologies in higher education (Arenas, 2015; El-Khalili & El-Ghalayini, 2015), and e-learning issues faced by faculty members (Islam, Beer, & Slack, 2015). However, while “our research foundation is rich” and varied (Passey, 2013, p. 209), not all challenges have been thoroughly identified and addressed.

The perseverance of these challenges suggests that TEIs have experienced a gap in understanding the present state of key stakeholders’ EOT needs. Over time, these needs have altered and developed, and in an environment of prompt technological change have not been understood and addressed effectively. The dynamic nature of the environment in which TEIs operate means that their relevance is reliant on their ability to adapt and advance to meet their stakeholders’ needs. However, doing this successfully requires that institutes have up-to-date, in-depth understandings of their stakeholders’ EOT challenges, at a level that promotes the delivery of informed, relevant support.

Through a phenomenological approach, this research aimed to interpret key stakeholders’ EOT experiences, determine their current EOT needs and challenges, and present a basis from which to recommend methods for relevant EOT support. Using a 5-step qualitative analysis of data, it analysed the EOT experiences of ten students and ten teachers, categorised these to reflect the character of their interactions with other key entities and then interpreted the meanings of the phenomena through an abstraction and synthesis of local and global themes. The global themes developed an overall set of interpretations about the meaning of stakeholders’ EOT experiences with other students, other teachers and content, and the local themes delivered meanings that were specific to their use of individual tools.

This paper is the fifth in a series of six publications that documented the local themes of this research, through written interpretations that express the meaning of the phenomena. It documents teachers’ EOT experiences with teachers, in reference to their use of two different types of EOTs: Learning management systems (LMS) (Blackboard), and online networking tools (Twitter, Facebook). Included in its interpretations are descriptions of stakeholders’ EOT challenges, which provide an authentic depiction of the phenomena to strengthen understandings of stakeholders’ needs. The interpretations helped to inform a set of recommendations for the skilful use of EOTs in teacher-to-teacher interactions. These were designed to assist TEIs in their efforts to adjust to meet stakeholders’ needs by providing a basis from which to manage EOT challenges and render relevant and meaningful EOT support.

To set the groundwork for this study, the author carried out preliminary research, which verified issues from literature, and created a foundation for the selection of interview participants. This research identified EOTs in BTEs (Tuapawa, in press), produced a classification system for EOTs (Tuapawa, Sher, & Gu, 2014, 2016), identified key stakeholders in BTEs (Tuapawa, 2016b), identified the EOT challenges of key stakeholders (Tuapawa, 2016a) and discussed a key challenge (resistance to change) in using EOTs (Tuapawa, 2015).
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