

Experiences of university professors: from in-person to virtual learning in the post-pandemic context

Vivencias de los docentes universitarios: de la presencialidad a la virtualidad en el contexto postpandemia

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Abstract

The objective of this research was to understand the experiences of higher education teachers during the transition from face-to-face to virtual learning following the pandemic that occurred a few years ago. A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design and semi-structured interviews with four teachers from the Early Childhood Education program with experience in both modalities was used. The analysis of the narratives, carried out using Atlas.ti software, identified eight emerging categories ranging from initial confusion and loss of human contact to collaborative adaptation, the discovery of new skills, identity transformation, and the sustained integration of digital tools. The findings show that virtuality not only posed technical and emotional challenges, but also opportunities for learning, pedagogical innovation, and a rethinking of the role of teachers. This study highlights the need for institutional policies that promote continuous training, socio-emotional support, and the consolidation of hybrid strategies in higher education.

Keywords: higher education, virtuality, post-pandemic transition.

Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación fue comprender las vivencias de docentes de educación superior durante el tránsito de la presencialidad a la virtualidad tras la pandemia ocurrida hace algunos años. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo con diseño fenomenológico y entrevistas semiestructuradas a cuatro docentes del programa de Educación Inicial con experiencia en ambas modalidades. El análisis de los relatos, realizado mediante el software Atlas.ti, permitió identificar ocho categorías emergentes que van desde el desconcierto inicial y la pérdida de contacto humano hasta la adaptación colaborativa, el descubrimiento de nuevas habilidades, la transformación identitaria y la integración sostenida de herramientas digitales. Los hallazgos evidencian que la virtualidad no solo supuso desafíos técnicos y emocionales, sino también oportunidades de aprendizaje, innovación pedagógica y resignificación del rol docente. Este estudio subraya la necesidad de políticas institucionales que impulsen la formación continua, el acompañamiento socioemocional y la consolidación de estrategias híbridas en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: educación superior, virtualidad, transición postpandemia.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented disruption in higher education worldwide, forcing universities to make a sudden transition from in-person instruction to emergency remote education models. This abrupt transformation disrupted established pedagogical practices and compelled university instructors to reconceptualize their roles, professional identities, and teaching strategies in environments entirely mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT) (García-Peñalvo & Corell, 2020).

In this context, it is crucial to understand the experiences of educators as key players in this shift, as their perceptions, meanings, and learnings are essential elements for rethinking higher education in hybrid and post-pandemic scenarios. During the pandemic, educational institutions were required to close their physical spaces and migrate to virtual environments through intensive utilization of technological resources to ensure the continuity of educational processes. This sudden change posed a significant challenge for educators, who had to adapt their pedagogical practices to a fully technology-mediated environment.

A study conducted by Delgado (2022) found that the abrupt transition to virtual learning during the pandemic resulted in challenges for university instructors due to their limited experience with educational technologies. This situation led to alterations in their pedagogical practices and psycho-emotional effects, including stress, anxiety, and frustration. Although the focus of this study was on health education, its findings are pertinent for understanding university educators' experiences during the adaptation process in the post-pandemic context.

In her research on the academic transition from in-person to virtual instruction at the Technical University of Manabí (Ecuador), De la Cruz-Quinteros (2023) discovered that instructors had to adapt to new ICT-based methodologies, expressing both positive and negative perceptions regarding the effectiveness of this process. While this study provides valuable insights into the university context, it does not delve deeply into educators' lived experiences, especially during the period following the pandemic, a gap this present study aims to address.

Moreover, the transformation toward virtuality was not merely an instrumental change in the use of technological tools; it involved a profound modification of the affective, relational, pedagogical, and identity dimensions of teaching practice. Córca (2020) argues that this evolution led many educators to resist change, manifesting as discomfort or resistance to the abrupt introduction of new methodologies and technological devices.

The obligatory shift to distance education in traditionally in-person institutions required the adaptation of teaching and assessment strategies. Del Castillo Olivares (2021) notes that prior evaluative methodologies failed to ensure authorship in assignments, complicating assessment processes and demanding more time from educators. Similarly, Rojas (2021) highlights that a significant portion of university faculty faced a teaching process for which they had little or no prior experience. Educators' experiences during the pandemic fostered lessons learned, resistances, adaptations, frustrations, and new understandings regarding the educational act that extend beyond mere technological adoption.

Academic literature has extensively addressed the technical and methodological challenges of emergency remote education during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, various authors concur on the need to deepen the understanding of educators' lived experiences during this transition. In this regard, Eroğlu and Şenol (2021) conducted a phenomenological study aimed at exploring the essence of instructors' experiences with remote teaching, uncovering issues related to low student participation, technological limitations, socioeconomic inequality, and a lack of pedagogical preparation for virtual environments. These findings indicate that the impact of remote education transcends instrumental considerations, engaging emotional, social, and formative dimensions that require understanding from a phenomenological perspective.

Authors like Galbán et al. (2022), also from a phenomenological approach, analyzed the transition from in-person to distance teaching among university instructors, emphasizing the importance of institutional support, pedagogical flexibility, and change management. Their findings illustrate that this phenomenon must be addressed from the essence of the teaching experience, avoiding a reduction to technological aspects alone.

Conversely, Caviedes (2020) examined reflections from basic education teachers regarding the transition to virtuality, concluding that this modality directly impacted their everyday methodologies, classroom dynamics, and assessment practices. While this study focused on primary and secondary education, its findings help contextualize the magnitude of the pedagogical challenges also faced at the university level.

Similarly, García Aretio (2021) reflects on the profound changes the pandemic imposed on the educational landscape, noting that distance education—primarily in digital formats—emerged as an emergency solution in response to the closure of educational institutions. The author warns that this improvised modality strayed from the pedagogical principles of planned, high-quality distance education, generating negative perceptions among educators, students, and families. Finally, he advocates for the need to shift toward hybrid and integrated models that flexibly combine in-person and virtual teaching.

In a national context, Reyes (2024) analyzed the experiences of Peruvian educators during the implementation of the basic education curriculum amid remote learning, employing a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The findings reveal that educators engaged in curricular adaptation, pedagogical flexibility, and socio-emotional support to meet the new demands of the educational context. This study reinforces the importance of understanding educators' experiences beyond technical aspects, emphasizing the human and reflective dimension of pedagogical practice.

Additionally, Supreme Decree No. 094-2020-PCM redefined social interactions and restricted movement, marking a milestone in the reorganization of the country's educational and social life. Landeo (2022) examined how a Peruvian intercultural educational institution navigated the forced transition to remote modalities during the pandemic, detailing the phases of change, technological difficulties, adapted pedagogical strategies, and the influence of the sociocultural context. His findings suggest that, in heterogeneous conditions, educators faced significant challenges in designing and delivering virtual classes, necessitating flexibility, creativity, and institutional support. This analysis highlights the relevance of researching educators' lived experiences beyond technical tools, demonstrating the tension between normative expectations and the emerging realities of unforeseen situations.

For all these reasons, this study aims to understand the lived experiences of higher education instructors during the transition from in-person to virtual education in the post-pandemic context.

Methodology

This study was developed within a qualitative framework and employed a phenomenological design to understand the essence of higher education instructors' lived experiences during the transition from in-person teaching to virtuality in the post-pandemic period. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology seeks to describe the meaning of human experience as lived by participants, prioritizing their subjective perspective.

Phenomenology, within the qualitative approach, allows for access to the lived structure of phenomena, capturing the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences in everyday contexts (Salgado, 2007). Applying this approach to the study of educators' experiences during the transition from in-person to virtual learning enables the identification of the essential structures of this transformative experience, addressing the subjective, intersubjective, and contextual dimensions that shape it.

The research was of a basic type, aimed at expanding knowledge about educators' experiences without intervening in reality (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). The sample was formed using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), selecting university instructors with experience in both modalities—face-to-face and virtual—during the post-pandemic period.

The data collection technique utilized was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the meanings attributed to experiences (Kvale, 2011). The interviews were recorded in writing and subsequently transcribed in Microsoft Word for analysis using Atlas.ti software, following a thematic phenomenological analysis process.

The data collection instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview guide composed of six open-ended questions, designed according to the principles of the phenomenological approach, aimed at exploring the lived experiences of educators during the transition to virtuality. Since the qualitative approach does not seek standardization or measurement, but rather deep understanding of meanings, no statistical validation of the instrument was performed.

Data analysis was conducted using axial coding with the Atlas.ti program. Initially, the interviews were transcribed, and units of meaning were identified through open coding. In the axial coding phase, relationships were established among the initial codes, grouping them into broader categories according to their common properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 2002). This iterative process allowed for the identification of eight emerging categories, which represent the essential structure of the phenomenon under study. The validity of the process was ensured through theoretical saturation, achieved when no new significant themes emerged in the final analyzed interviews.

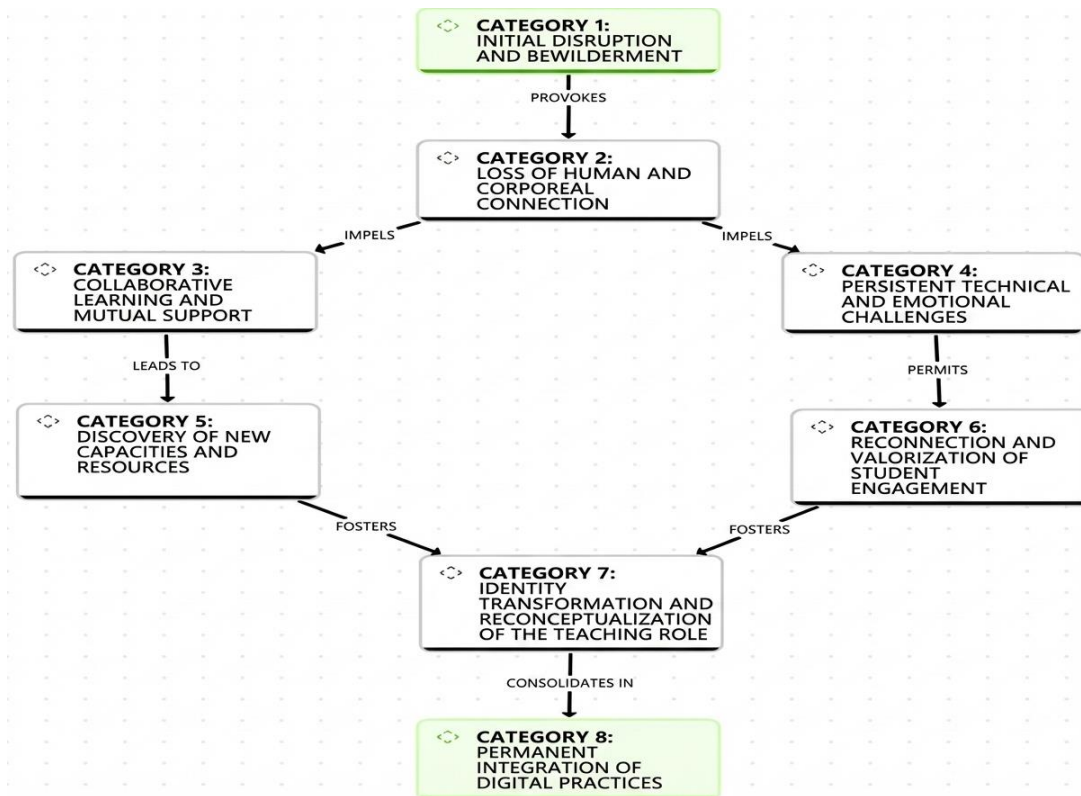
Finally, scientific rigor was maintained through the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, in addition to respecting ethical principles of confidentiality and informed consent set forth by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2021).

Results

The findings include the following:

Figure 1

Relationships between categories in teaching experience during the transition to virtual learning



Note: The categorical graph is related to Atlas.ti.

Category 1. Initial disruption and disorientation

The abrupt transition to virtual teaching generated a profound sense of disorientation and technological anxiety among instructors. The lack of prior preparation and the imposition of change led to significant emotional impact, expressed through confusion, initial resistance, and insecurity regarding the use of digital tools. This phase represented the most critical moment of the process, revealing professional vulnerability in the face of the pedagogical uncertainty triggered by virtuality.

Category 2. Loss of human and bodily connection

Participants expressed a deep sense of loss regarding the human contact and in-person interactions that characterized their pedagogical practice. Virtuality weakened emotional bonds and diminished gestural and physical communication, generating feelings of frustration and helplessness. The digital environment was perceived as distant, cold, and lacking the warmth of the physical classroom, affecting relational and emotional dynamics between educators and students.

Category 3. Collaborative learning and mutual support

Despite the initial difficulties, networks of faculty support emerged that facilitated adaptation to the new modality. Participants emphasized the value of peer learning, particularly the assistance from colleagues with greater technological proficiency. This support strengthened digital competencies and fostered an atmosphere of solidarity and cooperation that mitigated initial stress and solidified a sense of professional community. The experience demonstrated that collaboration is an essential resource for addressing educational challenges in changing environments.

Category 4. Ongoing technical and emotional challenges

As time progressed, educators continued to face technological and emotional limitations, such as connectivity issues, resource scarcity, and doubts about the pedagogical effectiveness of virtual teaching. These factors impacted motivation and generated instances of frustration, discouragement, and professional questioning. Virtuality required a continuous adaptation effort, where epistemological uncertainty and technical obstacles became persistent challenges within teaching practices.

Category 5. Discovery of new capacities and resources

Once the initial crisis phase was overcome, educators began to recognize their achievements and newly acquired skills. Feelings of pride, satisfaction, and resilience emerged as they realized their ability to innovate and effectively use ICT. This experience transformed into an opportunity for personal and professional growth, promoting the development of new pedagogical strategies, digital sensitivity, and didactic creativity within virtual environments.

Category 6. Reconceptualization and appreciation of student commitment

As acceptance of virtuality solidified, educators rebuilt connections with their students using available technological resources. This emotional reconnection was accompanied by genuine recognition of students' commitment and effort to remain engaged in virtual education. Digital interaction regained its pedagogical and emotional significance, strengthening the educational relationship through empathy and mutual understanding.

Category 7. Identity transformation and reconceiving the teaching role

Teaching in digital environments facilitated a profound reconfiguration of professional roles. Educators transitioned from a control and presence-oriented model to a more reflective, empathetic, and flexible practice. This process involved self-critique, unlearning, and reconstructing the sense of being an educator in technology-mediated contexts, reaffirming the human and ethical dimension as central to educational work.

Category 8. Ongoing integration of digital practices

Finally, participants recognized virtuality as a legitimate and complementary space for teaching. The experiences gained translated into the stable incorporation of digital tools within everyday pedagogical practices. Technology ceased to be perceived as an external imposition, evolving into a pedagogical ally capable of broadening the possibilities for innovation, interaction, and meaningful learning.

Together, these categories illustrate an evolving process of transformation among educators in the face of virtual teaching. This process begins with a crisis and disorientation phase, proceeds through stages of collaborative adaptation and professional affirmation, and culminates in a reevaluation of pedagogical practices. Educators moved from initial uncertainty to the establishment of a more flexible, technological, and human identity. Ultimately, virtuality represented a formative and reflective experience that allowed for a comprehensive, empathetic, and innovative rethinking of university teaching.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the transition from in-person teaching to virtuality in the post-pandemic context involved a complex process of emotional, pedagogical, and identity adaptation for higher education instructors.

The category "Initial disruption and disorientation" aligns with the findings of Delgado (2022), who reports that educators experienced distress and uncertainty due to the abrupt shift to virtual environments. This initial phase highlights professional vulnerability in the face of unforeseen changes and underscores the need for institutional strategies that provide support to facilitate adaptation during educational transformations.

Similarly, the category "Loss of human and bodily connection" reveals how virtuality affected the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching, echoing findings by Caviedes (2020) and Del Castillo Olivares (2021), who noted that distance education diminishes gestural and physical communication, thereby impacting the teacher-student relationship. Nevertheless, this situation also created new opportunities for collaborative learning, as evidenced in the category "Collaborative learning and mutual support," where cooperation among colleagues enhanced digital competencies, professional resilience, and a sense of community. These results are consistent with the emphasis by Galbán et al. (2022) on the critical role of institutional support and collaborative efforts as decisive factors in educators' adaptation.

The ongoing technical and emotional challenges, along with the discovery of new capabilities, illustrate a progressive and self-regulated adaptation process. Educators managed to transform their practices, consolidating

technological skills, didactic creativity, and innovative pedagogical strategies. These findings resonate with those of García-Peñalvo and Corell (2020) and Eroğlu and Şenol (2021), who argue that remote education involves not only the acquisition of technological tools but also the development of emotional, reflective, and professional dimensions that redefine teaching experiences.

Furthermore, the categories "Reconceptualization and appreciation of student commitment" and "Identity transformation and reconceiving the teaching role" reflect a profound reconfiguration of professional identity. This process corroborates the assertion of Salgado (2007) that phenomenology enables the understanding of experiences from the subjectivity of those who live them. Educators redefined their roles, shifting from a model centered on presence and control towards a more empathetic, flexible, and human-centered practice.

Finally, the category "Ongoing integration of digital practices" illustrates the positive and sustainable assimilation of ICT into pedagogical practices, supporting the proposal of García Aretio (2021) for advancing towards hybrid and integrated models that articulate in-person and virtual teaching. Collectively, this study confirms that post-pandemic teaching experiences are multidimensional, combining technical, emotional, and pedagogical challenges with significant learnings that redefine professional identity. The findings emphasize the importance of institutional policies that promote ongoing faculty development, socio-emotional support, and the implementation of hybrid strategies, thereby strengthening higher education in digitally mediated and constantly evolving contexts.

Conclusions

The journeys of the higher education faculty participants in this study revealed that the transition from in-person to virtual learning, in the post-pandemic context, constituted a complex process of emotional, pedagogical, and identity adaptation, thereby fulfilling the overarching goal of understanding the nature of these lived experiences.

Initially, educators encountered confusion, disorientation, anxiety, and resistance to change due to a lack of technological preparation and the impact of teaching in digital environments. However, over time, processes of collaborative learning emerged, enhancing peer engagement and fostering the discovery of new skills, which facilitated the consolidation of their digital competencies and redefined their educational practices.

While virtuality involved the loss of in-person and gestural interaction characteristic of traditional teaching, it also spurred pedagogical innovation and faculty collaboration, demonstrating that technical and emotional challenges can transform into opportunities for professional and personal growth. This transition promoted a redefinition of teaching identity, directed towards a more reflective, flexible, empathetic practice committed to meaningful student learning.

Moreover, the ongoing integration of digital tools in pedagogical practice evidenced that virtuality can complement in-person instruction, favoring the development of hybrid models that enhance interaction, creativity, and educational innovation.

Ultimately, the findings of this study underscore the necessity for institutional policies that promote continuous faculty development, socio-emotional support, and the implementation of hybrid pedagogical strategies. These elements are fundamental for strengthening the quality of higher education in contexts mediated by digital technologies and in constant transformation.

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