The transnational student learning experience: Giving voice to internationalization practices that enhance lifelong learning and transformation

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Abstract
Transnational distance education is a strategic practice that contributes to the internationalization of higher education. However, little is known about the transnational student learning experience and the practices necessary to support intended outcomes, including preparing post-graduates with essential skills and competencies for employment and lifelong learning within their local communities, country of origin, and globalized economy. Therefore, this study explores the factors contributing to the success and challenges encountered during a graduate program undertaken at an open, distance education university in Canada from the perspective of Greek female graduates. By employing a collaborative autoethnography approach, researcher-participants explored critical components including accessibility, communication, international perspectives and application, and transformation for lifelong learning to support quality dimensions in internationalization practices. As a result, we find a need for a more purposeful and comprehensive integration of internationalization practices across an institution to support and enhance the knowledge process that flows across borders through online learning environments and communication.

Keywords
Transnational Student Experience, Internationalization Practices, Open Online Distance Education

Introduction

This qualitative research study explores transnational learner experiences, including factors contributing to their successes and barriers or challenges encountered during their graduate program between 2016 and 2019 at an open distance education university in Canada. Framed within an arrangement between a university in Greece and a university in Canada, Greek graduate students were offered an opportunity to take two courses each semester at reduced tuition in Canada. This commitment involved a professor at a university in Greece who acted as a point of contact for interested applicants and students and enhanced student support services from Canadian faculty and staff.

Consistent with collaborative autoethnography, Greek colleagues are researcher-participants, and the entire research team is co-collaborators in this study (Chang et al., 2013). In order to address the gap in research and recognize the nuances of the transnational learner experiences, our research team includes three former transnational students from Greece who are graduates of a Master of Education (MEd) program, a transnational doctoral student, and two faculty members from the open Canadian university. In addition, we are all female educators and lifelong learners. This study examines the experiences of these former students.

Anastasia *I am an educator committed to lifelong learning. I am also a wife and a parent of two lovely children. I have worked in secondary and adult education since 2003. My students include expatriates, immigrants, and children with disabilities. In 2015, I needed to stay home and care for our children. The idea of working in distance education, especially after my experience tutoring Asian students online, seemed ideal. Still, I knew I needed more education in the field. So, I decided to register for the MEd program and began my new learning journey. I currently work as an instructional designer with substantial expertise managing e-learning projects involving research and curriculum design for European organizations. I create customizable learning solutions to promote sustainable e-learning and*

facilitate train-the-trainers workshops in many countries. My publications raise awareness of mindfulness in distance education.

Chryssa *I am an EFL educator and School Life Counselor in secondary education in the public sector. I participate in international exchange programs, focusing on inclusive education and teenagers' multiliteracies enhancement. Since my MEd program graduation in 2019, I have coordinated projects based on my new knowledge, skills, and competencies from all courses in this program. Also, I have been a member of the team of authors and trainers of the Distance Education program in Greece. Presently, I am attending a second master's program in Immersive Technologies, and I am pursuing a doctorate in technology-enhanced learning for digital and media literacy education in an interdisciplinary approach. I am a mother to twin daughters and a lifelong learner, always pursuing new paths in my learning journey.*

Maria *I am an educator and researcher. I currently teach science at a secondary school in Athens, Greece, and I have been teaching for more than 25 years. I hold a Ph.D., and I'm presently undertaking postdoc research regarding the systemic approach to teaching Earth Sciences. I am enthusiastic about taking my students on field trips and using augmented reality (AR) applications. Through the MEd program, I first encountered technologies such as AR and incorporated them into my Ph.D. thesis. I was looking for an online degree that would introduce me to international teaching practices and a solid theoretical background. I practice mindfulness whenever I get stressed, preferably somewhere in the forest.*

Literature Review

As the world continues to become more accessible due to the forces of globalization and innovative communication technologies, learners are more able to transverse across geographical borders without leaving their physical location or country to continue their education (Altbach & Knight, 2007). This practice, also known as transnational education, is defined by Knight (2016) as "the movement of academic programs and providers between countries" (p. 36). Expanding upon her definition, we have applied a contextual lens of open, online and distance learning modalities to support lifelong learning in order to situate our exploration of the transnational student experience. Transnational distance education is a strategic practice that contributes to the internationalization of higher education.

Scholars have not settled on a singular definition of internationalization because it's highly contextual due to the cultural, political, societal and economic priorities of countries and education systems and has quickly evolved over the past three decades due to globalization (Gao, 2019). However, internationalization can be understood as a county's or university's dynamic and proactive response to enhance intercultural relationships across borders (de Wit, 1999; Marginson, 2010). According to Qiang (2003), internationalization "…must be entrenched in the culture, policy, planning and organizational process of the institutions so that it can be both successful and sustainable" (p. 257-258). Students, faculty, administration, research, innovation, service, and practice flow across borders, thereby contributing to higher education's internationalization.

With a focus on access and equity, internet technologies transform the availability, affordability, and accessibility of education across borders and cross-cultural contexts (Daniel et al., 2005). Online distance education is a multidisciplinary field that utilizes internet-enabled technologies and new pedagogical models to shorten the time and space separation of the learner and instructor in the learning process (Bozkurt et al., 2015; Guri-Rosenblit & Gros, 2011). Transnational distance education can provide more equitable access to learning across borders and cross-cultural contexts and contribute to internationalization in post-secondary online distance education. However, with the commercialization of higher education, "degree mills" may fulfill the educational access gap (Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2015). This situation leaves vulnerable recipients, often from countries without a national quality assurance system, at greater risk of receiving unaccredited degrees or completing their program of study underprepared to contribute to their localized workforce or engage in the global economy (Eaton & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2008; Moore, 2009). Therefore, it is pertinent that international agreements guide the practice of internationalization and regulate the exchange of scholars, students, and academic programs to assure intended outcomes.

The literature and terminology related to the student experience in higher education is diffuse. For example, Potschulat and colleagues (2021) note that the concept has political and commercial undertones and represents various practices

that make it difficult to define. Similarly, a systematic review of the literature published between 2011 and 2021 by Matus and colleagues found that "student experience" is used widely in the literature, but there is no consensus on what it entails. Nevertheless, their analysis shows an increasing trend toward conceptualizing the term as an indicator of quality and satisfaction. Additionally, the authors report that the relationship between students' experiences, satisfaction and quality is more evident when the association between those experiences and university accreditation by bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency are scrutinized (Matus et al., 2021).

As we consider a universal design to meet the needs of all transnational student stakeholders, defining quality is a challenge because it is multidimensional and shaped by cultural values and individual paradigms (Garrison, 1993; Jung & Latchem, 2007). There is a growing body of knowledge across the landscape of quality assurance frameworks in online distance education, including efforts to expand the understanding of cross-cultural perspectives, similarities and distinctions to develop and practice quality (Jung et al., 2011; Khamis & Scully, 2020; Scull et al., 2011; Shelton, 2010; Smith, 2010). Unfortunately, these efforts often overlook the transnational student experience and perspective. Empirical literature in the emerging field of transnational distance education tends to analyze administrative perspectives and omit the transnational student perspective on quality learning experiences (Buchanan, 2019). According to Stewart (2017), the transnational student circumstances are nuanced and "suffers from a poverty of recognition" (p. 463). Therefore, this study explores the factors and challenges contributing to transnational learner experiences and the practices necessary to support successful outcomes, including preparing post-graduates with essential skills and competencies for employment and lifelong learning.

Methodological Approach

In order to give voice to transnational learners, this study used collaborative autoethnography a qualitative research method that uses rigorous self-reflection and reflexivity on individual and group experiences which are then analyzed and interpreted within sociocultural contexts (Chang et al., 2013). Autoethnographic methods are widely used to "articulate insider knowledge of cultural experiences" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 3). Collaborative autoethnography, therefore, is an appropriate method to gain insights into how three Greek graduates of a Canadian university describe and interpret the quality of their educational experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

Consistent with collaborative autoethnography, we started our inquiry with "interactive interviews" (Chang, 2013, p. 58) guided by open-ended questions about graduates' experiences as transnational distance education students. One co-author interviewed each graduate separately using Zoom, in which the sessions were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were shared with all Greek colleagues for feedback, and additional probing questions were asked and addressed asynchronously before the final transcripts were coded individually by two researchers. While appropriate for most qualitative studies, values coding was chosen because it focuses on cultural values, beliefs, and identity (Saldana, 2021, p. 171). The researchers negotiated to produce an agreed-upon set of themes and then shared coded transcripts with the Greek colleagues for feedback.

Findings

Common themes identified across the three transcripts were related to accessibility, communication, challenges, international perspectives, and transformational and lifelong learning. While the categories are not mutually exclusive, the narratives represent the collective voice of Greek MEd graduates unless otherwise indicated by quotation marks.

Accessibility to a Multicultural Experience Online

Because we have families and careers in Greece, we could not attend a place-based university, yet we wanted an opportunity to enhance our personal and professional growth. We believed that a North American university offering an online graduate program in education would know about the global trends that can further prepare us as educators by providing theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. We valued the opportunity to have a multicultural experience with exposure to different cultures and diverse teaching and learning perspectives.

Communications with Instructors and Others

Many of our course instructors connected with students informally; they shared personal information using pictures and videos that we found very welcoming. Instructors' feedback is essential to the quality of the student experience

because it is directly connected to the accomplishment of learning objectives. Instructors provided feedback not only on submitted assignments but also in the discussion forums, which helped to guide our learning. Most of our professors were very supportive, helpful, and friendly. Although our interactions were mostly asynchronous, which worked well given the different time zones, we appreciated the opportunities to connect synchronously in some of our courses. Communications with our peers took place mostly in discussion forums and collaborative assignments. However, as students in the same time zone, we collaborated with other Greek students more frequently.

We appreciated the support we received from the university community. We were notified of student awards and scholarships, and research opportunities. The president sent email messages out regularly. These kinds of communications made us feel that we were a part of a larger community.

Challenges as a Transnational Student
We experienced challenges, particularly at the beginning of our program. We had to get acquainted with so many different people from different places and cultures. For example, other students talked about their education systems and curriculum, but we did not understand their contexts, especially if they used acronyms. We sometimes had difficulty understanding the comments made by Canadian and other students who had different experiences and world views. People who live in the same country or have the same cultural background may understand each other more easily.

We did not know what to expect in our courses, and we were initially intimidated by deadlines. In our first course, we were expected to communicate with other students asynchronously in discussion forums. This was a novel challenge. We had to post responses to our instructors' questions and other students' posts. Because the content of some posts was new to us, it was difficult to reply, and sometimes it took hours to contribute one post. We wanted to make sure that we understood what others were saying before providing our responses. We knew what Greek professors expected from us, but we did not know what the international professors would expect.
Many of the assignments at our Canadian university were praxis-based. We reflected upon our experiences as professionals and learners so that we could connect practice and theory. Although each assignment was a new challenge, each led to new knowledge. Some of us struggled with academic writing and the appropriate use of APA citations which are necessary to avoid unintended plagiarism. We received informal coaching from one instructor in particular, who was very helpful. While we did very well in our courses and enjoyed the program, structured preparatory sessions would have helped.

International Perspectives and Application
Our program and instructors helped us interact with people and organizations worldwide through collaborative course assignments, a university graduate student conference, and several international conferences such as the International Association for Blended Learning (IABL).

Chryssa facilitated a MOOC for her Canadian University. Hundreds of international students attended. She also wrote a paper in her mobile learning course which ultimately led to an invitation to participate in a program called "media literacy in the digital era" in Kyiv, Ukraine, as a representative from Greece.

Anastasia wanted to be an instructional designer so that she could work for companies all over the world from her location in Greece. She has since worked with the Earasmus+ Project and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), designing courses for veterinarians who were doing fieldwork in hazardous conditions in an effort to eliminate animal diseases and malnutrition.

Maria incorporated new knowledge of augmented reality applications in field trips with her Geology students and invited other teachers to learn from these experiences. She realized that she could use this new knowledge in her Ph.D. research. She added a separate chapter that included feedback from her students on their experiential learning.

These experiences gave us new perspectives. We became more aware of the significance of our learning and how it provided us with exposure to pedagogies and technologies that could be applied globally.

Transformation and Lifelong Learning

During our study, many of our assignments were connected to experiences in Greece. We took a course about inclusive leadership and practice in education. We found that we acquired new skills at just the right time. Due to the inflow of refugees in Greek schools, the Greek educational community faced the challenge of accommodating students of different cultural backgrounds. This experience opened our minds to the importance of inclusive practices. Anastasia created a blog to help raise awareness of and suggest guidelines for inclusive practices. Maria and Chryssa did a conference presentation entitled "Embracing Migrants and Refugees: The Challenge, Vision, and Mission of a Greek Effort." Their presentation connected the concepts of inclusive leadership to the response to the crisis.

While doing a course on Gender studies and with appropriate permission, Chryssa and Maria conducted a study on an e-learning program in Greece called "Training Adult Educators." Our qualitative research sought to identify whether the learning design and support systems consider gender issues. We learned that distance education was growing in Greece, and people who opted for this mode of learning were mostly women. We found that women needed more support in the use of technologies. "When we presented our findings to our class in our MEd program, many of our female peers from different countries shared personal stories about biases and obstacles they have faced in their lives." As a result of that experience, Maria shared how deeply and personally she was affected by these stories and reflected on her transition among the different roles she has undertaken "as a woman, as a daughter, as a mother, as a wife, as a friend, as an educator, as a student."

Shortly after we graduated, the COVID-19 global pandemic provided us with a unique opportunity to apply our knowledge and skills across Greece. All three of us participated with other colleagues who had graduated from our program in a large project that provided intensive training for all educators in Greece in the public sector. We wrote training material and learning guides for using technology and participated in train-the-trainer programs. We feel proud that we had the skills to contribute in this way. Our Master of Education degree provided a solid base of knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a life-long learner. Beyond content, we have learned new problem-solving and time management skills, how to write academically with citations, apply our learning to our professional lives, and work collaboratively with people from different cultures. We understand the importance of formative feedback in mentoring relationships. We have discovered the importance of research in our careers, volunteer work, and everyday lives. We are no longer afraid of technology. Although we have graduated from our program, our learning journey goes on.

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Recommendations and Implications for Practice

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As we reflected on our time as transnational students in an online learning program, we agreed that while we encountered challenges, our international experiences were transformative, affording new opportunities both before and after graduation. Our engagement with the larger research team not only enabled us to appraise our personal experiences and accomplishments, but it also empowered us to apply a critical lens to examine key themes in the transnational student learning experience and contribute to a body of knowledge that underrepresents our voice (Stewart, 2019).

Distilled from the collaborative autoethnography approach, the research team found that transnational students describe a quality learning experience consistent with the quality dimensions identified by Jung (2011). Our findings suggest that transnational student stakeholders value social interaction, staff support, institutional quality assurance, institutional credibility, learner support, accessibility, and relevant learning activities. These quality dimensions are holistic in nature and require a systematic approach for all stakeholder groups to engage in a successful internationalization plan (Fischer & Green, 2018). Additionally, we recognize that other institutional stakeholder groups, including faculty members, learning designers and support staff, may not have an inherent understanding of internationalization practices and their cultural underpinnings (Fakunle et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a need for a more purposeful and comprehensive integration of internationalization practices in online learning environments.

This small study adds to the current body of knowledge and demonstrates the value of internationalization practices in higher education and how they provide intellectual, cultural, and employability benefits to online, transnational student stakeholders. Additionally, previous research has found that internationalization practices benefit all stakeholders, not just transnational students (Gemmell et al., 2015; Gift & Bell-Hutchinson, 2007). As Jung and Gunawardena (2014) remind us, cultures travel with learners through communication technologies. This transaction enriches the learning experience for all who interact in the educational process and immerses learners in new perspectives beyond the intended curriculum. We may conclude that internationalization strategies also improve quality dimensions, guidelines, and practices from the learner's perspective. However, it's critical to expand from this micro-perspective and review key conditions which enable the knowledge process to flow across borders.

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