

Reflections from a Novice Academic Integrity Researcher During COVID-19

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When I was accepted into a Doctor of Education (EdD) program, I could not have imagined that all of my data collection would occur during a global pandemic. I had enthusiastically submitted my research ethics application for approval in January of 2020 and was ready to begin interviews by the end of February. In March, when the pandemic became an exigent reality in Toronto, Canada, I began working exclusively from home and this included my doctoral work. At that time, I had one small collaborative research project underway, and my doctoral research about to begin. Both projects are related to academic integrity in Canada, and both stalled immediately. Now what!?! COVID-19 restrictions posed several challenges for me as a student researcher, however, as I adapted, I began to realize that it also provided some unexpected opportunities.

My doctoral research is surrounding contract cheating, also known as academic outsourcing (Awdry, 2020; Clarke & Lancaster, 2007). My methods are qualitative in approach, with in-depth interviews as my main tool for data collection. I had planned to schedule some face-to-face interviews and use technology for interviews when the distance was too great. I was fortunate that the quick shift to an entirely online environment suited my research methods and objectives, and that my overall research goals were not impeded. Although the pace at which I was collecting data slowed and even came to a grinding halt for about eight weeks, I was able to slowly pick things back up and begin to seek out and schedule interviews online. Over the months of the pandemic, to manage my day job, it was necessary to engage more deeply with information and communication technology (ICT). For example, I needed to become proficient with new online communication platforms and at hosting large governance meetings using video conference software (e.g., Zoom). Academic governance meetings are often attended by 50+ members of the academic community. This crash course in online meeting management provided me with the foundation, and later expertise, to confidently conduct my research interviews online, making the most of the technology to support my research. As my experience grew, I felt confident in my skills to record, ensure privacy, confidentiality, and develop trust and rapport with interview participants in an online space.

While my digital interview skills were growing, many questions arose related to the pandemic and my research. For example, how would faculty respond to a request for an interview during this time of unprecedented crisis? I had more than one faculty member, understandably, decline

an interview and express that they were immersed in creating online courses and responding to changes to their teaching and research practices. How would students feel about discussing cheating during this time? The media was flooded with stories about the rise of misconduct and the contested use of online exam proctoring. Had COVID-19 increased or decreased my potential pool of contract cheating assignment providers (also known as ghostwriters)? Had COVID-19 changed the very phenomenon I was about to research? As my interviews began to unfold and themes began to emerge, I started to have an appreciation that this flux is part of the nature of social research. Researchers must be able to roll with the dynamic nature of their research topics and consider new, unforeseen variables. Navigating change in my research project was refining and enhancing my skills as a researcher. As it turned out, ghostwriters, faculty, and students were willing to participate in the project, although I did strategically time my faculty interview invitations a few weeks into the summer semester to take advantage of that *slightly* less stressful period of time.

A last opportunity provided by the pandemic is regarding the digital landscape as it relates to academic integrity and misconduct. Although my research had always queried the role of technology and academic integrity, the pandemic swiftly moved this concept into the foreground. This shifted the representation of technology in the research plan, but also potentially advanced the need for the research results. Understanding the role of technology and digital literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) in higher education had suddenly never been greater. As it stands today, in the second week of November 2020, I have just completed my data collection. I had originally planned to complete the interviews by August 30, 2020. The other collaborative project is just now starting to get off the ground again. I am working at not being too hard on myself. My next step is to complete transcriptions and begin my data analysis and writing. It is exciting and also overwhelming. We are all still navigating the ever-changing landscape of education due to COVID-19; however, I am grateful for the lessons learned and opportunities as a novice academic integrity researcher.

References

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