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Adapting Teaching Strategies for Diverse Learning Modes: A Narrative Inquiry into Occupational Safety in Energy Systems Education in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

CONTEXT

In 2024, a chemical engineering lecturer at a Malaysian public university taught the same subject, Occupational Safety in Energy Systems, across three distinct modes: full-time, part-time, and fully online via an ODL program. Each mode attracted students with different profiles, from fresh graduates to working professionals with decades of experience, creating unique pedagogical challenges in engagement, collaboration, and assessment.

PURPOSE OR GOAL

The study seeks to document and reflect on the lecturer's experiences in adapting teaching strategies across these modes, with the goal of identifying effective practices and informing future curriculum design in engineering education.

APPROACH OR METHODOLOGY

Using narrative inquiry, the lecturer systematically reflected on teaching practices and gathered insights from student stories. Data sources included lecturer reflections, classroom observations, and informal student feedback. The analysis examined adjustments made to self-instructional materials (SIM), strategies for managing discussions and group work, and approaches to student engagement across full-time, part-time, and ODL cohorts.

ACTUAL OR ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Findings show that while teaching the same subject in three modes is demanding, it is feasible with careful planning and adaptability. Challenges included sustaining collaboration in ODL classes where students had never met in person, refining SIM for clarity and interactivity, and accommodating varying levels of student experience. Despite these hurdles, the lecturer was able to foster engagement, facilitate meaningful learning experiences, and identify areas for improvement in online pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

The experience demonstrates that adaptability, intentional use of collaborative tools, and continuous refinement of teaching resources are essential for managing diverse learning modes. It highlights the need for ongoing improvements in SIM design, online engagement strategies, and curriculum flexibility to ensure inclusive and effective learning for engineering students in different contexts.

KEYWORDS

Narrative inquiry, Multi learning modes, Online distance learning, Part-time study.

Prologue: A New Teaching Landscape

It was early 2024 when I found myself standing at a new pedagogical crossroads. I had been teaching Occupational Safety in Energy Systems since 2020, mostly to full-time students. They were young, curious minds straight out of undergraduate engineering. Then, in 2022, a part-time course was introduced, and I began teaching in both modes. But in 2024, the subject expanded its reach to include part-time and ODL (Online Distance Learning) students under the Master of Science (Energy Management) at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Three modes. Three different rhythms. One subject. One teacher, me.

The challenge was not just logistical. It was deeply personal and pedagogical. How do I teach the same safety principles to students who are learning in classrooms, on weekends, and alone behind screens? How do I ensure that each student, regardless of mode, feels seen, heard, and intellectually challenged?

This narrative tells the story of my journey: the puzzles I encountered, the reflections that followed, and the adjustments I made along the way. In doing so, I draw from narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000) to make sense of what unfolded.

Beginning Again: Teaching in a Program of National Importance

The Master of Science (Energy Management) program is more than a postgraduate qualification. It is a strategic response to Malaysia's vision for a secure, sustainable, and skilled energy workforce. Designed to accommodate a variety of learners, the program includes full-time students eager to specialise in areas like renewable energy, energy systems management, and safety engineering, as well as part-time professionals seeking advancement or re-skilling. In 2024, the ODL track was added to expand accessibility for those unable to attend campus due to geography, work, or personal commitments.

Among the fundamental subjects in the program are Sustainable Energy System Management, Mechanical Energy Management and Audit, Electrical Energy Management and Audit, Energy Life Cycle Cost and Emission Analysis, Thermal Energy Management and Audit, Energy Integration and Resource Conservation, Energy Planning for Conservation and Sustainable Development, as well as Occupational Safety in Energy Systems. Against this ambitious backdrop, Occupational Safety in Energy Systems plays a critical role. The subject is not just about legislation and standards; it is about cultivating a safety mindset in contexts where failure can be catastrophic. Teaching it, I realised, required the same level of care and precision that I hope my students would later apply in the field.

For this course, the foundation of my teaching strategies was anchored in the officially approved Course Information (CI) document for Occupational Safety in Energy System. This ensured that learning outcomes, content sequencing, and assessment strategies were consistently aligned across the three delivery modes. For full-time and part-time students, I had already established a teaching rhythm that combined face-to-face meetings, formal instructions via the eLearning system, and informal communication through WhatsApp. The pedagogical design here emphasized constructive alignment, where learning outcomes were reinforced through class discussions, group tasks, and assessments tailored to student engagement levels, albeit with slight modifications in time management for part-time learners.

The more significant pedagogical shift occurred with the sudden introduction of the ODL mode, which I was informed about only two to three weeks before the semester began. While still guided by the CI, I had to redesign the delivery into Self-Instructional Materials (SIM) that allowed students to learn independently, at their own pace and location. This transition was not merely reactive but informed by instructional design principles: chunking content into manageable sections, embedding reflective questions, and integrating tools like Padlet and eLearning to sustain collaboration and interaction. These decisions were deliberate responses

to the ODL context, aiming to preserve cognitive presence and learner autonomy while compensating for the absence of physical classroom interaction.

Method

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore the author's lived experiences through stories, situated within the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place of teaching the Occupational Safety in Energy Systems course across three delivery modes: full-time, part-time, and ODL at UTM. The course is part of the Master of Science (Energy Management) program under the Faculty of Chemical and Energy Engineering and was offered concurrently to all three student cohorts in Semester 2 of the 2023/2024 academic session. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological framework due to its suitability in capturing the complex interplay between personal experience, pedagogy, and contextual adaptation in higher education teaching (Bullough, 2008; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In the context of this study, narrative inquiry was particularly suitable as it allowed me, as the instructor, to document my reflections across three different teaching modes, while also incorporating students' accounts of their learning journeys. This approach emphasizes meaning-making rather than simply reporting events, thereby offering insights into how teaching strategies evolved in practice and how students perceived their learning in diverse modalities.

Data for this research were drawn from three primary sources:

- (1) the lecturer's written reflections documented throughout the semester;
- (2) field notes and observation logs taken during synchronous and asynchronous interactions with students; and
- (3) informal student feedback gathered through emails, WhatsApp messages, Padlet interactions and course survey. These data sources provided a rich, multi-modal picture of teaching challenges, emotional responses, pedagogical decisions, and evolving instructional strategies.

To frame the process of teaching and learning in these modes, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) provides an important foundation. Kolb describes learning as a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These stages map naturally onto the teaching adjustments described in this study. For example, site visits and group projects offered concrete experiences; students' reflections and lecturer feedback enabled reflective observation; theoretical discussions and safety principles promoted abstract conceptualization; and the redesign of assignments, including video-based presentations in the ODL mode, exemplified active experimentation. Using Kolb's model, the narrative analysis highlights how both lecturer and students continuously cycled through these stages, deepening their engagement with the subject matter.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000) further supports the pedagogical analysis by explaining how online and blended learning environments can foster meaningful educational experiences. The three core elements of CoI: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, were used to interpret the dynamics of the ODL mode in particular. Through these frameworks, the study explored how the instructor adjusted content delivery, engagement techniques, and assessment practices based on learners' profiles and the affordances or limitations of each learning mode. For example, limited use of cameras in synchronous sessions posed challenges to social presence, while structured assignments and discussions aimed to strengthen cognitive presence. Meanwhile, the lecturer's efforts in designing SIM and facilitating synchronous Webex meetings demonstrated teaching presence. By situating the findings within the CoI framework, the study illustrates the opportunities and constraints of creating a community of learners across different modes, and the pedagogical strategies that can strengthen engagement despite contextual limitations.

The narrative was constructed inductively, beginning with chronological recollections of each teaching mode, followed by thematic integration across the semester. Experiences such as SIM development, online engagement, site visits, hybrid assessments, and a mid-semester teaching handover (due to Hajj pilgrimage) were interwoven to surface the tensions, trade-offs, and insights that emerged.

Rather than relying on formal interviews or standardized survey instruments, the study prioritized authentic practitioner voice and student narratives as evidence of teaching impact and pedagogical learning. This is in line with the constructivist orientation of narrative inquiry, which positions both teacher and learner as meaning-makers within evolving learning environments.

This methodological approach aligns with practice-oriented educational research and seeks to contribute meaningfully to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), especially in the underexplored terrain of mode-diverse postgraduate engineering education in Malaysia. Together, these three frameworks: narrative inquiry, experiential learning theory, and the Col, provided a robust methodological and pedagogical foundation for analyzing the teaching of Occupational Safety in Energy Systems across multiple learning modes.

Findings and Discussions

Meeting My Students Anew

Each student group brought a different energy. The full-time students were like fresh batteries, enthusiastic, sociable, and at times overconfident, with the majority being international students. Part-timers arrived at class with stories, real stories of safety lapses, audits, and high-stakes decisions. Then came the ODL students, silent at first, hidden behind usernames and muted screens. This was the first ODL batch, ten students in total, fresh and completely new to the experience, new to each other. ODL students didn't know their peers, and some didn't even know what group they were in.

"I don't know anyone in the class. I just registered last week. What should I do?" one ODL student texted to me.

That message stayed with me. It exposed the silent disorientation of new online learners, some of whom were juggling families, careers, and perhaps other issues God knows what. They were new not only to the subject, but to the virtual classroom itself.

In contrast, full-time students, six of them were undergraduates from various countries (only 1 from Malaysia), but they were passionate, excited and could form groups within minutes. They filled the room with laughter, side conversations, and spontaneous teamwork. Part-time students, though less available, arrived focused, strategic, and ready to connect during precious weekend hours. Managing these contrasts became a pedagogical puzzle that shaped the entire semester.

Relearning to Teach

I began by asking myself: who am I in this new story of teaching? (Bullough, 2008). No longer the central performer in a class room, I had become a designer of learning journeys. And those journeys needed to be different.

For full-time students, I could rely on student-centred-learning (SCL) via group tasks, safety debates, presentations, site visit to the sub-station within UTM campus (Figure 1) and others. They needed structured and frequent feedback (formative assessment). My presence in the classroom allowed me to respond in real time to their needs. I was allocated 14 weeks with them, meeting them every week in the semester.

For part-time students, I leaned into their experience. Our weekend classes turned into reflective workshops. I became more of a facilitator than a lecturer. They taught each other about construction industries, energy policies, power grid, chemical risks, and regulatory

nuances. I spent three face-to-face weekends with them, each a full Saturday and Sunday (16 hours x 3 times) at UTM City Campus, located 325 km from both my home and the UTM main campus.



Figure 1:. Site visit to UTM Power Sub-Station for my full-time students

But the ODL class was something else. At first, I struggled with a sense of loss. There were no faces, no laughter, no signs of confusion or delight. The ODL course required six online meetings, each lasting two hours.

My early SIM felt dry, especially because we (the instructors) suddenly need to prepare for the ODL. I am not blaming anybody but myself. I realized I needed to design the SIM fast, according to the way I thought it should be (at that time). A week after launching the course, I began to wonder whether my SIM was properly prepared. Deep down, I felt it was still far from satisfactory, let alone flawless.

That question haunted me. I realised that digital delivery, while flexible, lacked the warmth and immediacy of physical presence. ODL students didn't know their peers, and some didn't even know what group they were in. On my side, my SIM need to be perfected.

Small Steps Toward Connection

I realized I need to a good strategy to approach the ODL students. The first breakthrough came from a Padlet wall. I asked students through the newly created ODL WhatsApp group to introduce themselves briefly, stating their company using the Padlet Map feature. The wall filled up in one day (Figure 2). An automation engineer from Clementi, Singapore. An electrical engineer from Lynas Advanced Material Plant from Gebeng, Pahang. A process engineer from Tawau, Sabah. It was really interesting. I shared the Padlet result with other Master of Science (Energy Management) program instructors, thinking that this can also help them know these ODL students better.

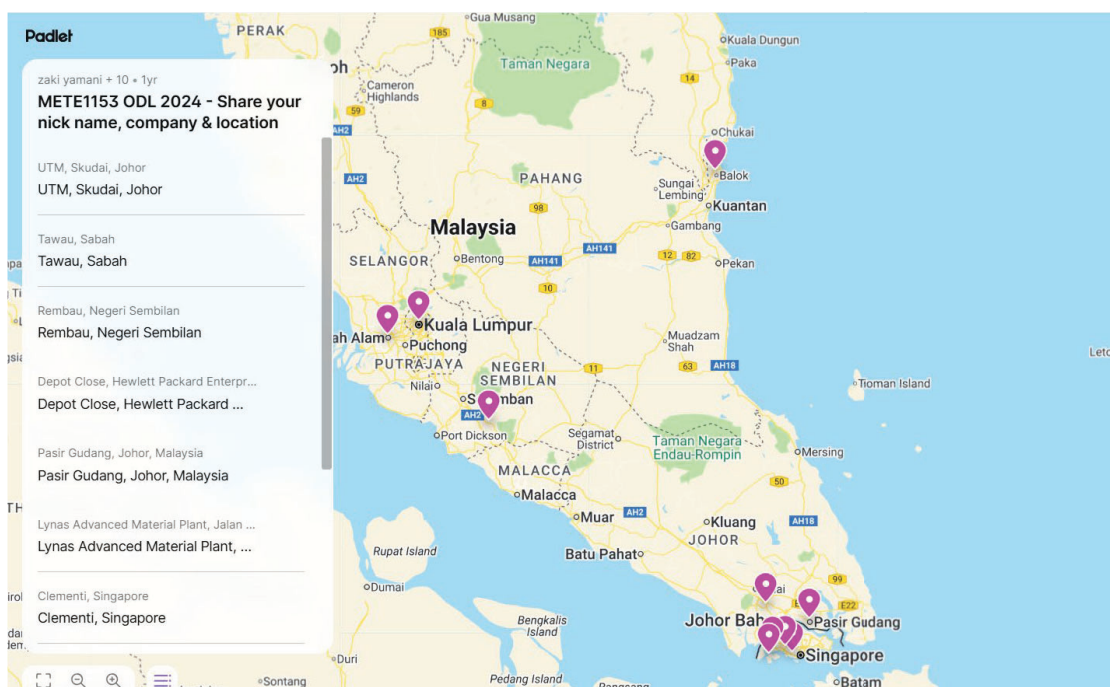


Figure 2: The Padlet Map for my 2024 ODL students

As I see the information stated in the Padlet, I realised then: these were professionals with stories. I had to redesign the SIMs not just as materials, but as invitations. I added real-world safety dilemmas, video explainers, and even a choose-your-path activity simulating a power plant emergency (Laurillard, 2012).

The interaction didn't explode. But it grew. Group projects were still tough. But I left it to the students to figure it out themselves. Slowly, work began to flow.

"We never met face-to-face, but I felt connected through our shared deadline," one student commented.

It made me smile.

"Honestly, I was scared I wouldn't keep up. But the way tasks were chunked really helped," shared another.

These voices affirmed that even small pedagogical decisions can have profound emotional impact.

Holding the Complexity

As early as the first week, I began to feel the weight of managing three distinct modes of teaching. Each mode brought its own timelines, expectations, and demands for support. Balancing these, alongside my responsibilities as a university administrator and active researcher, proved to be one of the most testing periods in my academic career. The fragmentation of time, juggling non-stop meetings, institutional paperwork, post graduate student supervision and course preparation, often required switching mental gears multiple times a day. Almost each day were spent with meetings and reviewing administrative documents. I would give way to course preparation and troubleshooting a Moodle-based activity in between meetings or late-night at home. Furthermore, there were two separate Moodle systems used for this course: eLearning (for full-time and part-time students) and the ODL platform (specifically for the ODL class). The cognitive and emotional toll was immense, and fatigue, coupled with a fear of underperforming, became constant companions.

Designing the SIM for the ODL mode was particularly taxing. Unlike real-time teaching, SIM development demanded rigorous anticipation of learner challenges. I had to ask myself: What would make a complex safety concept clear in my absence? How could urgency, ethical tension, or field complexity be simulated in a static module? Although I had prior experience with Center for Advancement in Digital and Flexible Learning (CDeX) UTM contributing to a guideline module on SIM preparation, applying that knowledge to a dynamic and technical course like Occupational Safety in Energy Systems proved far more challenging. Despite attending training sessions, this was my first real application of SIM within a live ODL context. I spent countless late nights rewriting instructions, sourcing visuals, refining notes, instructions, submission link, and trying to scaffold concepts for asynchronous learners. I must admit, the SIM I produced was far from perfect. While I had aimed for clarity and learner autonomy, I now view it as a first draft, an important starting point in what I now understand is an iterative and ongoing process of improvement (which strongly relates to Kolb's learning cycle).

Compounding the academic and administrative load was a major life event, that was my Hajj pilgrimage. This deeply meaningful journey required me to step away from teaching responsibilities from Week 9 to Week 14. Prior to my departure, I handed over the Occupational Safety in Energy Systems course to a trusted and experienced colleague, briefing him thoroughly and ensuring that instructional materials were complete. Even so, the mid-semester handover left me with a lingering sense of incompleteness and concern over student engagement and continuity. Upon returning, I resumed full responsibility, particularly in preparing and managing the final examination, and assessments.

Talking about assessment, it brought its own challenges. How do you test fairly across three different modes? With the ODL students, this was a major worry. Administering final exams required careful planning, including secure proctoring and equitable design.

I must admit that I was not adequately prepared to implement secure proctoring for the ODL students. The best solution I could manage at the time was to monitor them via their live cameras on Webex. To make matters more challenging, the final exams for both the full-time and ODL students were scheduled simultaneously. I found myself invigilating the in-person exam in a classroom while simultaneously monitoring the ODL students from my laptop. The experience taught me the importance of academic planning, teamwork, and spiritual balance in the life of an educator.

Amidst the challenges, I also found growth and renewed appreciation for the teaching profession. The full-time students reminded me of the enthusiasm and joy of learning; the part-timers grounded me with real-world industry insights; and the ODL students, often working in silence, demonstrated humility and persistence through thoughtful, self-directed work. These diverse learner profiles pushed me to grow as an educator. I began to see myself not just as a teacher, but as a connector of learners, facilitating different paths of engagement across modalities.

The theories I once learned, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) and Garrison's Community of Inquiry (2000), took on personal meaning. I found myself living through the cycles of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualising, and experimenting (Figure 3). I realised that for the ODL cohort especially, I needed to build not just cognitive presence, but also teaching and social presence. The most complex challenge was ensuring consistency in student experience across modalities. I often questioned whether ODL students received the same depth, feedback, and sense of connection as their peers in live sessions. Again, I realized my SIM is not perfect this year. But can it improve next year, or will it be perfect in the third year? It really depends on various circumstances. I hope the SIM will be far better next year (in 2025) if not perfect.

This dual identity, as educator and administrator, created constant internal tension: should I prioritise institutional responsibilities or invest more time in my teaching content?

Yet, within this complexity, I discovered a deeper understanding of my role. I was not just delivering content but re-learning how to teach. This semester, demanding and deeply

transformative, allowed me to reclaim the joy, vulnerability, and difficulty of becoming a better educator. The challenges reminded me that quality teaching is never static. It is a dynamic practice shaped by reflection, iteration, and above all, care.

Owing to the experiences described above, I have gained valuable insights into the realities of teaching through diverse delivery modes, especially within the context of ODL and SIM implementation. These experiences exposed me to new challenges that went beyond content delivery, such as student engagement in asynchronous settings, instructional clarity in self-paced materials, and managing academic responsibilities alongside personal and professional commitments. One key lesson I have learned is the importance of anticipating the learner's perspective when preparing materials for independent study. Clarity, structure, and interactivity must be embedded thoughtfully into the SIM to ensure students feel guided and supported, even in the absence of real-time instruction.

Moving forward, there are several steps I plan to take to improve and strengthen the quality of teaching and learning in this course. Firstly, I will gather systematic feedback from students who have experienced the SIM to understand their learning difficulties and areas of confusion. This will guide the revision and enhancement of the SIM content and structure. Secondly, I intend to collaborate more closely with colleagues who have successfully implemented ODL and SIM in other technical courses to exchange best practices. Thirdly, I aim to participate in advanced training workshops and communities of practice within UTM or beyond, to stay updated with innovative ODL strategies. Lastly, I will consider integrating more multimedia and interactive elements, such as short videos, quizzes, and reflection activities, into future SIMs to increase engagement and comprehension. Through continuous reflection, peer learning, and iterative improvement, I am committed to ensuring that future versions of the course meet the diverse needs of learners while maintaining academic rigour and accessibility.

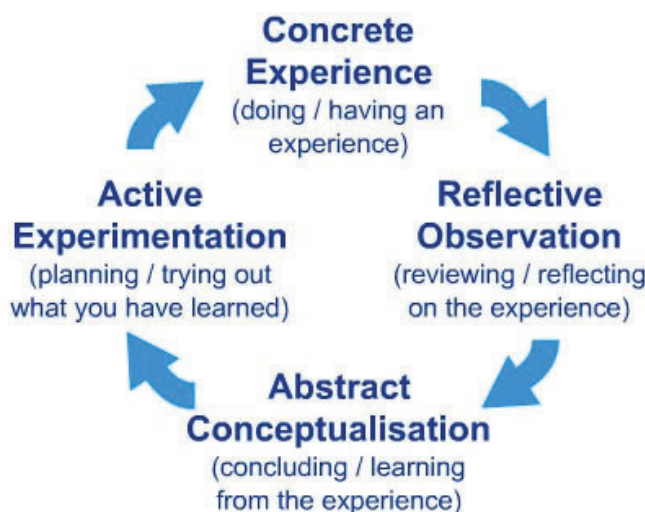


Figure 3: Kolb's learning cycle really took place in me, repeatedly

Constructive Alignment Through Col and Adult Learning Principles

Analysing the scenario, this was indeed my first time handling the ODL mode, and it coincided with the students' very first semester under this structure. Hence, there was a steep learning curve for both the instructor and students, requiring continuous adaptation, exploration, and experimentation. Despite these challenges, the design of activities, assessments, and feedback was still guided by the principles embedded in the CI document to ensure that learning outcomes remained consistent across all three modes.

For full-time and part-time cohorts, constructive alignment was clearer: learning outcomes were supported by in-class discussions, assignments, group projects, and presentations, with assessments culminating in a test and a final exam. Feedback was ongoing and immediate, gathered through face-to-face communication, observation of students' reactions and behaviors, and informal channels such as WhatsApp. These in-person interactions allowed me to gauge cognitive presence and adjust instructional strategies in real time, which aligns closely with the Col framework.

For the ODL mode, alignment required more intentional modification. While the same learning outcomes and assessment structure (assignments, test, final exam) were preserved, I adapted presentation tasks into video submissions to account for time and logistical constraints. Feedback was more difficult to replicate, as Webex sessions were limited and students often kept cameras off. To compensate, I relied on alternative cues such as students' use of emoji reactions (thumbs up, smiley) and structured Q&A moments to sustain teaching presence. Although not as rich as in-person interaction, these practices allowed me to approximate real-time feedback and maintain some level of social presence. In revising the initial SIM, I deliberately applied principles of chunking, embedded reflective prompts, and provided clearer instructions, which were informed by both Col's emphasis on cognitive presence and adult learning principles that stress learner autonomy and self-direction.

In future iterations, I recognize the need to make these alignment strategies more explicit, particularly by framing the design around Col's three pillars: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence, and linking activities and assessments more systematically to each. This will not only enhance the replicability of the approach but also provide a clearer theoretical contribution for engineering educators designing multi-modal learning experiences.

Lessons for the Future

This narrative journey has also reshaped my understanding of teaching in engineering education. It has taught me that teaching is relational, students respond when they feel seen. That flexibility matters, one size does not fit all. That ODL learners need early, intentional support to foster belonging. And that reflection is not an afterthought, it is the heart of professional growth. I no longer ask, "*How do I deliver this content?*" Instead, I now ask, "*How can I invite these learners into this conversation?*" The story is still unfolding, but I walk forward with new eyes, more open, more aware, and more prepared to meet my students where they are.

Conclusion

Teaching Occupational Safety in Energy Systems across full-time, part-time and ODL modes has been a deeply transformative professional journey. It demanded more than content delivery. It required pedagogical courage, emotional resilience, and adaptive design thinking. Through narrative inquiry, this paper has illuminated the nuanced complexities of working with diverse learner profiles, each bringing distinct expectations, constraints, and learning rhythms. From the immediacy of face-to-face sessions to the silence of asynchronous engagement, each mode invited a different teaching presence and prompted continual reflection and recalibration.

This experience underscores that effective teaching is relational, iterative, and context sensitive. It affirms the value of frameworks such as Kolb's experiential learning cycle and the Community of Inquiry model as lenses to interpret and respond to emerging challenges, especially in online and distance learning environments. Most importantly, it highlights the centrality of the educator's own learning journey of becoming, not as a linear progression, but as an evolving cycle of reflection, humility, and growth.

As Malaysian higher education moves toward greater flexibility and inclusion through technology-enhanced learning, this narrative offers a grounded example of how thoughtful instructional adaptation, supported by institutional culture and peer collaboration, can uphold

teaching quality across modalities. While the journey was marked by imperfection and uncertainty, it also revealed moments of connection, insight, and professional renewal. These moments reaffirm that even in complexity, teaching can be a site of meaningful transformation, for both students and educators.

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