Transcript of Interview with Mona Lopez by Christopher Hohman

Interviewee: Mona Lopez
Interviewer: Christopher Hohman
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Location (Interviewer):

Abstract: This is an oral history interview conducted with narrator Professor Mona Lopez of St. Mary's University by interviewer Christopher Hohman on October 28, 2020. The narrator discusses the challenges and benefits of online teaching and how the COVID19 pandemic necessitated changes in her teaching style.

Christopher Hohman 0:00
Okay, so I am here with Professor Mona Lopez of St. Mary's University, San Antonio. Today is October 28, 2020. And it is currently 2:38 p.m. in the afternoon. And what I want to do here today with Professor Lopez is I want to get her thoughts and her story about being an educator during the era of COVID-19, both in the spring 2020 semester and in the fall 2020 semester. So, um, my very first question is, what did you enjoy most about your courses prior to COVID-19?

Professor Mona Lopez 0:39
The social interaction, right? Most of- I mean, I've been a teacher for 30 years, 30 plus years, and my style of teaching has always- has always been to engage students through social interaction, that means interacting with the professor interacting with each other, interacting with the content. So before- before COVID, a lot of my instruction was based on social interaction, you know, you've been with me enough to know that I always say the one doing the talking is the one doing the learning. And- and so I feel like the more the students are interacting, the more they're learning.

Christopher Hohman 1:22
Right. Okay. So as we've established, you enjoyed most was the social interaction you got through students and that they got with each other. But then, on March 13, 2020, the university sent out an email that- that announced that the remainder of the course would be taught virtually, from the beginning of, I think, March 23, to the end of the semester at the beginning of May. So um, how did you feel when you learned that you would be teaching courses virtually for the rest of the semester?

Professor Mona Lopez 1:58
Yeah, so- so that then, you know, when that happened, we really had to shift quickly into I call it a survival mode. And it was almost like, the focus was not so much mastering the objective anymore, as it was making sure that our students were still with us, that they were safe, and that they were able to still access our courses. So are, you know, it's like- it's like a layered approach, right? The first the first thing I did was send out a survey. I don't know if you remember, but I sent out a survey to all my students to say, where are you? What kind of technology are you going to be using? So do you- is it only a phone? Or is it a phone and a laptop? Is it a tablet? Do you have internet to be able to do this? What time zone are you in? In Diverse Pops (Education in Diverse Populations), you remember, we had a student that was in Japan, when she went

home, she went all the way to Japan. So we're like, what time zone are you in? So the priorities shifted from, you know, from mastering the course objectives to: are you- can you stick with us for the remainder of the semester, and how can I continue to connect with you for the remainder of this semester? That became the priority of the course. Then finishing the course strong was the second priority. But it was a huge shift, just- just was managing our students first. And if you remember, I've talked to you about, you got to know your students by name and need. And so in this case, I had to find out how your needs changed based on the pandemic and based on the shift on the 13th of March. How did your needs change after that, you know? Your set of needs were way different before the 13th and after the 13th. And so I had to make sure that I addressed those needs. We- remember Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, says if you don't address those basic needs, learning is not going to happen. And so our priorities shifted a bit from mastery of content to knowing how our student's needs could still be met for the remainder of the semester.

Christopher Hohman 4:10
Okay, um, so, um, we transitioned into virtual learning, and what parts of the teaching experience for you were most challenging to adapt?

Professor Mona Lopez 4:23
Technology. Certainly, certainly, it was, you know, how do you use technology to be able to still hold class? Before the pandemic, my- my extent of using Canvas was just -Canvas was just a receptor of information, right? It was just, that's where you turn in your assignments. That's where I recorded grades. That's where I posted files, but it wasn't really a venue for instruction. It was more like a collector of materials, right? It wasn't really where you could you know, do online teaching by yourself. If you couldn't get it from me, could you still learn the course just by accessing the modules? And before COVID you couldn't, because it was pretty much just a receptor of information. It wasn't an instructional venue. So my biggest challenge was, how can I use technology now? How am I going to shift Canvas and my use of Canvas to incorporate Zoom and to incorporate chat and to incorporate breakout rooms and all of that, so that it became a an instructional tool, and not just a receptor of information and a collector of files. So that was my biggest challenge was adapting to use- and this is the thing, Chris, that technology's always been there, I just never used it, right? So it kind of- I feel like you know, when the old- the little bird is at the end of the branch, and it's just kind of hanging in there and doesn't know if it wants to fly or just kind of stay in the safety of the nest. Well, I was in the safety of the nest. That's where I was comfortable. I was comfortable teaching the way I had always been teaching. So after the 13th of March, really had to jump off that branch, and we were pushed off; it was just like we're pushed off. And it's just like go with it. And the university provided a real quick, during that week of transition, remember, after spring break, we had that extra week of transition? So during that week, the university provided some real quick sessions on how to use Canvas, how to use Caltura, the basic different formats that we had available that we could use immediately. And for those of us that had not been using them, you know, we had a real quick one week session on how to use these platforms to help us finish out the semester.

Christopher Hohman 6:46
And so we discussed just now, what you thought was difficult, but was there anything that you thought was easier than you thought it would be? Or anything that you actually kind of liked about virtual teaching?

Professor Mona Lopez 6:58
No. [Laughing] The short answer, no. I think that after a while, and I say that because the change was just such a hard change for me as a teacher. But after a while, the one thing that I did appreciate was that Zoom afforded me the opportunity to be more available to students because, you know, we could hold our office hours on Zoom. It made me more accessible. It made it easier for students to access me and for me to meet with them on an individual basis. I felt like I was able to personalize some things for our students, if you remember in diverse pops, the final exam I had given each of you a specific class, with the specific makeup of students-

Christopher Hohman 7:48
My American History class.

Professor Mona Lopez 7:49
Yeah, yeah. And so- and so if you remember, I had like one on one meetings with you. And we walked through your class and I said, this is who you have, what is your plan? I didn't do that before. Before, I would give just a general assignment. And with the Zoom and the individual conferences, and the availability of that, I was able to personalize those classes. And I think when I do that, it makes it more meaningful for you. Right? Because you would have had no interest in doing this lesson if it was for a language arts eighth grade class. It wouldn't have been as interesting for you as it was when I gave you the opportunity to do this for A.P U.S History class. It's just more meaningful,

Christopher Hohman 8:30
Right? Because I remember being excited about like, oh, I get to go think about my favorite moments about- about my lesson plan for my AP US history course and think about because it was the you gave me a TEK (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) for the Civil Rights Movement. I got to think about how would I teach this? And how- how- what kind of concepts do I want to touch on, you know, from individuals in civil rights movements to important laws to other important vocabulary. And that was really- that made me really enthusiastic about the assignment in a way that, like you said, if it had been an E.L.A. class, that had been assigned to all of us, or a large portion of us that I probably wouldn't have been as enthusiastic.

Professor Mona Lopez 9:10
Yeah. And we've taught- this this semester, we're talking about the importance of motivation. And students are more motivated to get engaged with the content if you personalize it for them. And so the ability to have individual conferences via Zoom, facilitated the ability for me to personalize. I mean, I had 27 students in that class, so it was like 27 different assignments, but it was easy, because I was able to do individual meetings with each student. So it really worked. That was- that was one of the things I really enjoyed doing was it helped me tailor to the personal needs of the students; the assignments were able to be a little bit more customized and tailored because of the technology.

Christopher Hohman 9:52
Um, my next question is the- well, the semester ended fairly successfully at the beginning of May. We got into the summer months when universities were considering if and how and when

they would reopen. And the meanwhile, um, in the in the meantime, the virus here in San Antonio is getting worse, especially peaking sometime in the middle of July. At one point, we had 1200 cases a day, multiple days in a row. And on July 16, the University sent out its plan- an email with a plan about how to reopen the school. Courses would begin on August 11. They would be offered in three different formats. The online, the virtual, and the in-person virtual. How did you feel about the University's plans to reopen?

Professor Mona Lopez 10:45
And I felt like the first of all, I thought I felt more prepared, Chris, because over the summer, all of the faculty were engaged in the online training certification course. So we all went through, it's a, I believe, a four week, five week, maybe six week course, where we became certified to teach online. So throughout this course, we were given access to other tools. And we were given the opportunity to practice using other tools and actually format an entire course through this program that we were in, we actually had to format an entire online course and create an entire online course. So in doing those modules, it helps strengthen my skill set for if a student had to do this course only online, would they still be able to do that, right? And so it really helped. I don't know if you saw that with your other professors or not, but it- it helped also standardize how our Canvas looks. Most professors all have like, the courses have a homepage, and each module has an overview, right? So it for the students, I think, it also helps standardize- because before that everybody's Canvas look really different. You know? My Canvas looked really different from somebody else's Canvas. And so I think this helps standardize, for students, how to navigate courses through Canvas with a standard procedure. So I felt better equipped over the summer, so that when the university gave us the gave us the three options, I felt like I was ready for all three. If I needed to teach something, only online, asynchronous, I could do that if I needed to teach it virtual, I could do that if I needed to I.P.V. (In Person Virtual) I could do that. Right? It gave us opportunities to practice all three ways of delivering content. So I felt a lot more prepared at the beginning of this semester to do that. I felt like for the University to be able to do that for our students was probably the most inclusive way to accommodate the needs of all of our students, right? It helps students that that are in The Valley (Region of Texas) or in another part of Texas or another part of the country to still be- be St Mary's students because they could take their courses either asynchronous as an online [course] or they could take it virtual, so they were still part of the community, even though they were not physically at the school. I like that because I think that's the way to include as many students as possible, and not- and not X students out. My preference is still that having the in-person, but I will tell you that I. P.V., and you're in my I.P.V., so you know how difficult that is for me because I want to look at you, but then I want to look at the screen. And just like I'm going back and forth. I'm still working on that, right? Because I kind of feel like I'm if I'm looking at you, I'm ignoring them. If I'm looking at them, I'm ignoring you. And so I'm still working on how to do that better, the I.P.V., but I do feel like training opportunities this summer to be prepared for any of those online virtual or I.P.V., it gave us the tools and the skills to be a little bit more prepared because we needed to be ready to teach in any of those modems, you know, any of those modes depending on what our students needed.

Christopher Hohman 14:20
So um, my next question is we just got done speaking about in person virtual classes, and I'm in your in person virtual classes for for Educational Psychology, and how does it feel for you as an

educator to be in that room with most of your kids on virtual and only a couple of kids in the room?

Professor Mona Lopez 14:48
It's like the Twilight Zone. It's just like, it feels so surreal because I will say that, you know, I'm just- I naturally reflect at the end of the lessons, right? When a lesson- when one of my classes is over and everybody's gone, I take a couple minutes to reflect and say, "Okay, this was my intent for the class. And this is what we did. Did- did our tasks match my intention? Whatever I had the class- whatever we did together as a class, did it meet the expectation I had?" Right? Or the intentions I had for that class? And so I feel like, you know, when I'm reflecting after class, with the I.P.V., I have a hard time, I have a hard time saying that that's happening. It- I just, I just don't think it's happening to the degree that I want it to, right? I'm still comparing it to well, if we were all in person, yeah, this is, this is how they would have left. They would have left with this understanding, right? And I think for me, the hardest part of both I.P.V. and virtual, is I- I'm still struggling with how to check for understanding. Like how to check that students are understanding the concept or understanding the task that I'm assigning, you know? And I just need to keep finding tools and doing a better job of framing the course. So that I, in fact, one of the articles that we're going to read for Monday, talks about using formative assessments, and formative assessment is checking for understanding, right? So I read it, I loved it, I wanted to share it with you guys because I just- I'm still seeking for more ways to check for understanding. When you guys are in person, I can check for understanding naturally, there's just body language, verbal cues, physical cues, level of engagement. Those things let me know if you understand the concept or not. I.P.V. and virtual, it's a black screen. I just see the name, or in your case, I see the ship. You know? I don't know, I don't know if you guys are understanding the concept or not. And so part of that's me needing to find more tools to be able to gauge your level of understanding. Because until I can do that, I have a hard time when I reflect at the end of class, did they get it or not? And I just can't tell. And for me, that's the hardest part because I use formative assessment to know what to do next. Do I need to go back and reteach? Do I need to go slower? Do I need to go faster? You know, what do I need to do? That's why I have found these small group meetings that we do have been helpful because they're a way for me to gauge on a smaller scale your understanding of what's expected in the course.

Christopher Hohman 17:33
And my final question, and we've touched on this a little bit throughout the interview, but overall, how do you feel about virtual learning?

Professor Mona Lopez 17:43
Wow, I just- I feel like there's- there's so much to learn still. I feel like it's certainly something that we should have been doing all along. And like I said, I was the little bird that was pushed off the branch who said, "Whether you're ready or not, you're gonna do this." Right? And so I feel like there's a lot of potential in virtual learning. I feel like that as- as a professor in the education department, I need to do a good job of modeling virtual learning because you guys could be thrust into that same situation. And I should be modeling the strategies and the techniques for formative assessment and checking for [understanding] so that when you are in the same situation, you feel comfortable using some of these platforms and programs. So I feel like it's- it has a lot of potential. And we're just tapping it right now. And we're- and it's we're all in the role-

we're all put in the student role right now. I feel like I'm in the student role all over again, and just kind of learning strategies and techniques to do a better job at virtual instruction. I hope that answered the question.

Christopher Hohman 18:53
Yes ma'am. And that is actually our final question. So um, thank you so much for joining me today. I really appreciate it. I think just listening to you speak has- has definitely contributed a story and a very- a very powerful voice to the archive that this interview will hopefully be contributed to.

Professor Mona Lopez 19:17
Good.

Christopher Hohman 19:19
So thank you so much for agreeing to do it. And I hope you have a wonderful day.

Professor Mona Lopez 19:25
Thanks. And thanks for your patience with me, Chris. I appreciate it.

Christopher Hohman 19:28
Bye, thank you.

Professor Mona Lopez 19:31
Bye bye.