Online Learning During the COVID_19 Pandemic: A Multiperspectival Narrative of Vietnamese University Students

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ABSTRACT
Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning has become more popular and challenging in the panorama of higher education in Vietnam. However, there has still been very little research strongly focusing on the lived experiences of online learners, especially the English-major students in Vietnamese universities. In this paper, I retold the process of my students' collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry into their lived experiences of learning online under the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic at a technology university in southern Vietnam. My research wonders came from two questions: (1) What is online learning? and, (2) Who are the Vietnamese students in this space? Early in the time together, my students came to understand how the narrative beginnings shaped their wonders in relation to online learning. I then employed collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry as the research methodology to better understand the experiences in online classroom communities and the learners' relationships with the institutional, social, cultural, and personal narratives before, during, and after their online learning journey. Through the process of telling, retelling, and reliving those storied experiences, I came to learn that online learners' experiences of online learning have not been fully paid attention by the instructors and university; the online learning journey still lacks physical and mental support; and intimate relationships with family and 'learning buddies' could help them overcome the challenges. Finally, I engaged in the questions of "so what?' and "who cares?" to shape the forward-looking stories for those being and becoming online learners.

Keywords: online learning, pandemic, storied experiences, autobiographical narrative inquiry, mental support

1. INTRODUCTION
1.1. On Coming Together
Amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic, four of my undergraduate students came from different backgrounds to discuss and share their interests with me about online learning in Vietnam. They also wanted to learn about narrative inquiry at the online gatherings that I curated to support Vietnamese students who like to discover more in research methodologies. Our journey has started since October 2021 with our weekly meetings, in which I shared my teaching on narrative inquiry research methodology and guided my students through the writing process. We progressed throughout the year with telling, retelling, and reliving so many stories of these students as online learners. Together we co-composed our narrative inquiry as our group research project, and also the students gave consent for me to tell and retell their selected featured stories in curating this paper.

By sharing their stories and memories from earlier experiences of online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the students understand that this wisdom has shaped who they are and who they are becoming as English major undergraduates, and as human-beings in relation to the institutional and social world. Through our project, we build kinship with our team members' experiences and ourselves' experiences and bring our diverse values to raise our voice for the communities we are from. Together, the students' stories bump up and rub against the dominant narratives surrounding online learning. But I seek to expand understanding their lived experiences in a more holistic and educative way and bring voices from the margins of online learners into the existing conversations while acknowledging there is yet much for us to learn.

1.2. On the Contexts of Online Learning in Vietnam During the COVID-19 Pandemic
In Vietnam, the number of students who experienced online learning before the COVID-19 pandemic hit was really modest. In 2019, only 3.3 percent of higher education students engaged in online learning according to reports (Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, 2021). Moreover, it has been conservatively believed that the most successful educational approach is the traditional face-to-face education. Thus, making online education an unfamiliar concept to the majority (VietNamNet News, 2020).

Since the occurrence of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnamese students have faced many obstacles when learning online. These obstacles include learning motivation, complicated objective factors such as parents complaining, friends dominating, social media, and sleeplessness (Dung & Thuy, 2020). Also, online learning skills and Internet access were considered a major hindrance (Tran & Bui, 2020), as well as the issues of network information security (Duong et al., 2020). However, there have been some gradual improvements when lecturers are able to exploit many effective, invested online teaching methods. Seeing this reality and being inspired by the urges to understand the lived experiences of online learners, I encouraged my students to share their stories, which later turned into the significant materials for this narrative inquiry.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: COLLABORATIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY

I guided my group in beginning the journey by first learning about narrative inquiry (Clandinin& Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin&Rosiek, 2007; Huber et al., 2011). It is meaningful for the students and me that

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated, … narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinin& Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

As my students and I read this definition together and unpacked the other articles and book chapters, we worked to co-compose a shared understanding of our approach to our research. We also learned from Cardinal (2010) and Saleh et al. (2014) that autobiographical narrative inquiry emphasized telling and re-telling stories, which has later driven us to attend not only to our current online learning experiences but also to the stories we carried within as we entered into those online learning environments. As the students attend to living, telling, retelling, and reliving their storied experiences (Connelly &Clandinin, 1999), their understanding is continuously informed by who they are, and by their personal views of curriculum and related facets of online learning and teaching at a Vietnamese technical university.

I continued with the students in the process of collecting data (field text), which can include "transcripts of conversations, field notes, family stories, memory box artifacts, photographs, and other texts that are composed by narrative inquirers and participants" (Clandinin& Huber, 2010, p. 11). My students chose to work with their annals (Clandinin, 2013), which drew into stories of their early landscapes as online learners. Then the students moved forward to inquiring into memory box artifacts to evoke more stories of experiences. Finally, I composed the final research texts and attended the resonant threads that echo and reverberate (Clandinin& Connelly, 2000) across their lived stories. Significantly, the resonant threads pave the way for my forward-looking thoughts which showcase the responses for the questions of "so what?" and "who cares?" in relation to online learning in Vietnamese higher education.

3. TELLING STORIES OF BEING AND BECOMING ONLINE LEARNERS

In this telling, the students shared their stories of being and becoming online learners in Vietnamese higher education under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They embraced annals and artifacts as two windows to unfold their experiences.

3.1. Annals
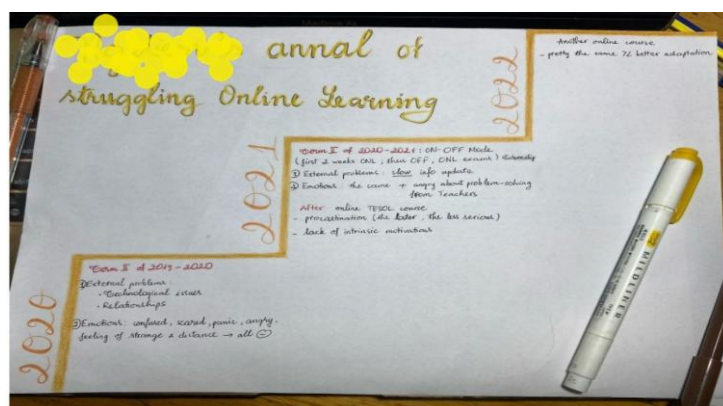### 3.1.1. Minh-Châu's Ladder of Online Learning

Figure 1: Minh-Châu'sannal.

Early 2020, Minh-Châu was in her third year of an English-major program when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred and turned her learning upside down. At first, technological issues gave her a painful beat. She remembers in her Interpretation 2 class, she was asked to watch a video, record her interpretation, and submit it on the Learning Management System. However, when she tried to access the course, her screen turned white and automatically logged her out. None of her classmates encountered this before, so they were skeptical about her case. She kept texting her instructor to inform her of the situation regardless of not receiving any responses. Subsequent to thousands of pressing the reload button, Minh-Châu could ultimately hand in her late assignment. Afterwards, her instructor replied to her doubtfully but might think she had no reason to lie, for Minh-Châu was a hard-working and enthusiastic student. In fact, her friend in another class experienced the same problem, but his instructor did not trust him and marked him a zero.

During 2021, the pandemic hit harder and Minh-Châu extremely struggled when she had to do her internship online. This gave her an unanchored feeling on the highest step of her learning ladder. She recalled those days:

"Online internship in a university office repetitive and boring

Had imagined I would be up to ears

But - no workplace experiences

No direct feedback

No actual interactions

Always lonesome in a desolate room

Confused and disappointed

because I'd yearned for practical experience

Nothing really remained

Not sure whether my skills improved

I told many lies in the report

Said I learned many valuable lessons, improved professional skills

I hate that

Wonder if I had told the truth,

Would I have passed the course?"

3.1.2. Mai-Sen: Online Learning or a Roller Coaster?
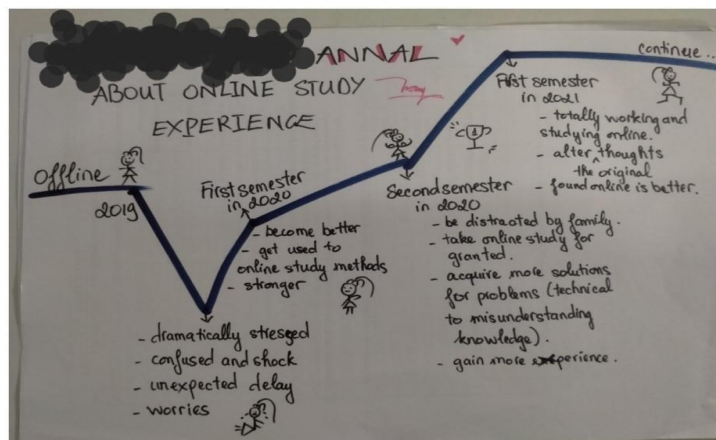

Figure 2: Mai-Sen's annal.

Mai-Sen began to study online in 2019. How did she feel? Absolutely panicked, surprised and worried like she first stepped on a roller coaster. First, her university announced that all lecturers and students had to use the 'Zoom' platform for online classes, and problems arose. Her university was not capable of equipping premium accounts for lecturers, so the only option was free meetings within 40 minutes. For each class of 90 minutes, lecturers and students had to log in and out 3 times, not counting technical and internet connection problems. That caused them tons of inconvenience and annoyance. Second, not all online classes require students to turn on their cameras, which creates no 'real interaction' between instructors and students. The students just sent messages via the provided chat box. The classes progressed in a monotonous and boring way, with only the instructor's voice because the students were shy and scared if they might say wrong answers. Feeling exhausted and distracted, Mai-Sen sometimes surfed Facebook and Instagram and also did other assignments during classes.

Moving to 2021, she continued studying online while working as an online English tutor for a high-schooler group. Mai-Sen suddenly realized how disappointed when no one responded to her as an instructor. Thus, when coming back to her online classes, she tried to respond to her lecturers as much as possible to help them feel less

disappointed. The milestone came right at this period. She started to be keen on online classes and considered online platforms very convenient as she could work from everywhere. She has felt less 'air-sick' on her roller coaster of online learning than before.

3.1.3. Lan-Ngọc's Dilemma and Puzzle

Figure 3: Lan-Ngọc'sannal.

The Talk. Lan-Ngọc's close friends and she got together for a conversation about their academic and personal lives during the COVID-19. Her first year of online learning was difficult and lonely. She was not fully prepared as she had no one to guide her. Entering the classes, Lan-Ngọc felt like she was a programmed machine. Also, she has become accustomed to the sounds of chopping wood, water bubbling and nagging from her mother to the dogs, but she still found it difficult to concentrate on studying at home. The rise of online learning has made her confined to her dining-studying table. She was frustrated.

The News. Lan-Ngọc's faculty informed her that five of her six subjects would be offering online final exams. Immediately there was an explosion of emotions in her head. What would be the next step? What's the best way for her to study for the exam? How would the examiners monitor the students' online performances? There were dozens of unanswered questions. Then on her speaking test, the instructor put students in breakout rooms for waiting. Lan-Ngọc couldn't see her peers taking their tests and that made her be on pins and needles. Suddenly, the instructor appeared in her breakout room and signaled to begin the test. She was so frustrated and scared.

The Relaxations.Fall 2021, Lan-Ngọc submitted online assignments, took online quizzes, and took the final exam. Slowly, she got used to online education by making the switch from pen and paper to tablet and laptop for taking notes. Every so often, she would watch the entire recorded video of a lecture that she was having trouble following. All of these made e-learning gradually convenient for her.

The Furry. Fall 2022. Coming back to school after a long time truly terrified her. Lan-Ngọc deeply understood that attending classes and meeting friends face-to-face would help her, but she was afraid of reality. She could not avoid whatever happened, she had to leave her comfort zone to continue. Being in the 'New Normal' Vietnam for long and arguing with herself about which types of learning she prefers created in her a dilemma.

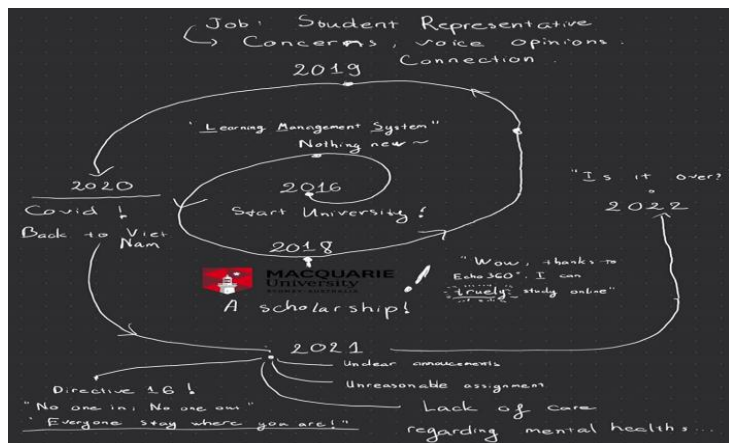### 3.1.4. Thành-Nam's Spiral of Online Learning

Figure 4: Thành-Nam's annal.

When Thành-Nam slowly revisited his experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 timeline, he realized in mind an emerging pattern of a spiral, a continuation of many ups and downs. Traveling back to 2018 when he was doing his English-major program in Vietnam, Thành-Nam received a scholarship from Macquarie University and traveled to Australia to pursue the Business program. In December 2019, the COVID-19 outbroke in Australia and cases continuously appeared around campus. Public transports shut down, essential goods were scarred, and fear was among the students. Early 2020, he took the last flight back to Vietnam before the border closure because he was struggling financially and academically. During the quarantine camp, as a student representative, Thành-Nam asked Macquarie University to make some adjustments regarding the grading. They finally accepted that adjustments must be made to meet students' needs. It was a really "victorious moment" when he knew his voice was listened to. But in the end, he had to come back to Vietnam. From 2020 to 2021, Vietnamese government issued Directive 16, which was the ultimate strict social distancing to combat the COVID-19. Non-essential businesses were closed, public gatherings were banned, and literally everything went online without any proper preparation or notice. The students were thrown into uncertainty where everything changed by minutes and nothing was clear, even the syllabus could not tell them what they were doing. And even worse, the connection between the university and its students was abruptly cut off. Thành-Nam and his classmates could not find any platform to voice their concerns; all they did was to accept the policy as it was, without any questions asked. Eventually, he lost his will to study.

3.2. Artifacts
3.2.1. Minh-Châu's Mechanical Pencil

Figure 5: Photo of Minh-Châu's pencil.

It was a tough time for Minh-Châu, as a traditional learner just making notes with a mechanical pencil, to be familiarized with the newly online learning method. She was quite lagging and struggling with absorbing the information virtually because of getting confused between typing the lesson contents or traditionally jotting them down. After much loss in the directions of typing the instructor' words, she decided to come back with her 'powerful weapon': her mechanical pencil. As a result, the authenticity was becoming more obvious; it was companionship of her pencil that supported Minh-Châu not only to overcome fears of learning from home but also to reduce pressures through the process of virtual learning adaptation. Although her mechanical pencil became old and somehow damaged, it has been still an invaluable antique to her for 9 years.And in the midst of the pandemic, this pencil has come alongside her study, listened to her words of struggles, cheered on her achievements, and eased her nervousness during the exams.

3.2.2. Mai-Sen's Intergenerational Laptop

Figure 6: Photo of Mai-Sen's laptop.

Mai-Sen's family has a tradition of using items passed from the older generation to younger generation, so she had used her aunt's laptop first and then her dad's laptop for several years. She remembers the time when he gave it to her and told her to use it carefully. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Mai-Sen has used the laptop for online learning every day. It helped her from joining online classes to doing assignments and online exams. Her laptop also became a means of communication to connect with friends, instructors, and relatives. She had many memories with her laptop, both sweet and sour. The sweet moments were when she passed the online exams with good results, and when she felt confident to present online. The sour time dominated the sweet time, with many experiences of struggling technological issues, and losing connection during classes. She now recalls the day when she took one of the hardest subject's mid-term tests. Mai-Sen had to open numerous tabs to prepare before the test. When she was carefully reading the questions, her laptop was suddenly disconnected to the internet. She has always been a person that experienced anxiety a lot in her life, so she was extremely panicked. She muttered to herself: "Oh my, what can I do right now?"

3.2.3. Lan-Ngọc's Eye-Care Products

Figure 7: Photo of Lan-Ngọc's eye-care items.

One day after seven hours staring at the screen for online subjects, Lan-Ngọc's eyes became extremely itchy, red and sore. She could not continue looking at the screen. She stopped and cried because she felt bad leaving the lesson in the middle. "Why so?" - She questioned herself. She then slowed down and there was a whispering voice in hers, "it's because you didn't see your eyes as so important; you need to take care of them". That was truly a moment of awakening. Lan-Ngọc suddenly realized that she had been asking her eyes too much and forgot that they also needed her care. Later that day her mother advised her to go to bed early so that her eyes could rest, and the following day her mother bought two eye-care products for Lan-Ngọc. Thankfully, the Simple revitalizing eye roll-on has made her eyes more relaxing, and it could partly eliminate her eye circles. In addition, Eyemiru eye-drops have supplied vitamins to cure her itchiness. Her eyes now become active and happy when she does online lessons, and Lan-Ngọc recognizes she should pay more attention to her health as it is an integral part of her studying. Whenever she feels tired, she learns to slow down and listen to her body.

3.2.4. Thành-Nam's Invisible Cage of Online Learning

Figure 8: Photo of Thành-Nam's image.

The COVID-19 had come to Thành-Nam's city for over a year. One day, over the silence and emptiness of the world, he saw his own reflection. Patched on the pale walls of his home with verticals of grills tampering with his silhouette. There, he suddenly felt like he was a prisoner to these current events that he had no control over.Day by day, he got up, had breakfast, attended his online morning classes, then lunch and afternoon online classes. Thành-Nam was with himself in the apartment facing the laptop screen and trying to absorb the knowledge from the courses all day long. Due to the heavy amount in curriculum, plus the monotonous progress of lessons and the busy-ness of instructors which made them far from caring for every single student's emotional needs, he always felt isolated in communication within his virtual classrooms. Thành-Nam felt like a prisoner to his own place, with not enough knowing of what's happening to the outside world. He has no other choice but to wait for the endless cycle of hopelessness, to the spiraling chaos of unresolved issues that keep on numbing the society. He wonders when he will be able to get back to his days with in-person learning — the carefree, reckless but living-in-the-moment bliss.

4. RETELLING STORIES, LEARNING FROM THE RESONANT THREADS: THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Coming to the process of retelling, the online students' experiences are more deeply understood under the three dimensions of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013): sociality (personal and social relationships), temporality (past, present, and future), and places. Under these lenses, I come to see three resonant threads that echo across the students' experiences.

4.1. Thread One: The Online Learners' Experiences Have Not Been Fully Attended

Telling and retelling their stories, I come to learn from my students that their experiences of online learners during the pandemic have not been fully attended by the university and instructors. The university delivered some surveys to students but aiming to use the feedback to assess the lecturers rather than finding solutions to improve the learning experiences. The instructors also struggled to adequately support students who were struggling with the transition to online learning, not only learning contents but also technology issues during classes and exams. More noticeably, online learning under the pandemic's negative impacts was more teacher-centered than student-centered as the students were seen as passive participants and knowledge vessels, while the instructors mainly focused on completing their online teaching. The instructors might be too busy to acknowledge that their students come to classes as human beings, with their identity, dignity, and many relationships with institutional, familial, economic, social, and educational landscapes. But again, it is critical for the students' every corner issue with online learning technology, with adopting and adapting the new learning environments, with new ways of testing and assessment, and with so many more to receive full attention from the university instructors, administrators, and other staff related.

4.2. Thread Two: The Students' Online Learning Lacks Physical and Mental Support

The shift to online learning during the pandemic has been difficult for my Vietnamese students due to the lack of physical support. Due to the time and technology constraints, many instructors are not well-versed in technology and thus, they could not provide adequate assistance to students facing technical issues. Outdated syllabi, passive deadlines, and irrelevant assignments also added to the students' confusion and frustration as they stepped into and progressed through the online learning journey. The lack of clear guidelines and communication further compounded the challenges faced by students during online learning amidst the pandemic.

Additionally, online learners like this group also lacked mental support resources that they had wished for. The university provided some free instant noodles and fresh vegetables during lockdowns but failed to address the mental health needs of students. Seeking mental health support is stigmatized in Vietnamese culture, making it challenging for students to seek help. Sometimes, instructors and students also felt they lacked trust in each other due to sudden technological issues leading to late or incomplete assignments or exams, which only exacerbated the situation. The students did wish for more support to optimize their positive mental health.

4.3. Thread Three: Intimate Support from Family, Friends, and 'Learning Buddies'

Although their online learning journey was really challenging, the students learned that intimate relationships with family and 'learning buddies' could have a significant impact on their learning and living. Despite the insufficient support from institutions and instructors, the students' personal connections can offer invaluable encouragement and aid. In Minh-Châu's experiences, her mother reminded her to take breaks and have meals during long days of lessons, and she had her beloved pencil as a great companion. With Mai-Sen, she received encouraging words from parents to exercise for better physical and mental health, and she always found supportive strength from her proudly intergenerational laptop. As for Lan-Ngọc, she relied on friends for sharing knowledge and information about the pandemic and felt grateful for her mother's eye-care products which later became a 'must-have buddy' while studying and doing exams. However, things did not happen in similar ways

with Thành-Nam when he was not able to access the support from family and friends during the pandemic. Instead, he had to overcome additional hurdles in order to keep up with his coursework, often with limited resources and support. Thành-Nam wished for potential intimate support in his near future.

5. RELIVING ONLINE LEARNERS' STORIES: THE FORWARD-LOOKING THOUGHTS

In reliving the students' told and retold stories, I pay attention to the questions of "so what?" and "who cares?" to help shape my imagination of the forward-looking stories for those being and becoming online learners.

At first, I practice the four-direction looking (Clandinin, 2013) and believe that curriculum for online courses should not remain unchanged with those of conventional classrooms, and proper adjustments of online courses should be applied because online learning was really immensely rough to those first approaching it. Looking inward, I hope for more opportunities to tell the truth about how difficult the online learning phase has been for every individual university student. Looking outward, I wish the curriculum for online learning to bring a more flexible, adaptive, and supportive learning environment, in which the dominant school curriculum will be well combined with the "lived curriculum" (Aoki, 1993) to best support learners as not only the ones doing study but also the ones living amidst their personal and social relationships. Looking backward, I expect more technology training workshops for both online learners and online instructors. Looking forward, I dream of a practical IT Support office on campus of Vietnamese universities and online, where any instructors and students can walk-in with their questions of online teaching and learning.

Secondly, I am hopeful that online learners' mental health will receive much more attention from Vietnamese institutions. Students cannot flourish in online learning when they are suffering stress, lacking confidence, feeling scared of failing the courses, feeling lonely, and facing the pain and sorrow that the pandemic has brought to their families, relatives, and friends. I seek to see the students' mental health aspect importantly available in online courses design, online testing and assessment, graduation, and other institutional policies. I also seek to see that the instructors' mental health is also well recognized and supported. It is obviously that only when the instructors flourish, they will be able to uplift the students' flourishing.

Thinking more deeply on mental health, I see the expansion of learning on how to seek support resources and self-care outside the institutional narratives. The online students' first support comes from their intimate relationships with family members and friends. Family conversations also bring to them the intergenerational knowledge and wisdom to make them feel less lonely and more grounded. One additional support is from the simple but powerful 'learning buddies': their pens, pencils, laptops, health care products, and other learning equipment, which the students usually take for granted and forget their significant value in regular learning contexts. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world up-side-down, these 'learning buddies' shared happiness and sorrow with the learners. These buddies are no longer their learning resources; instead, they become the true partners in online learning.

Finally, I long to see that online learners' voices will be heard more often by instructors, university administrators, support staff, and other stakeholders in Vietnam. The students' stories have shown that their voice has received so little attention that their experiences have not been able to be fully understood and supported. Now that narrative inquiry opens the door for their experience sharing, I am hopeful about a safe, non-judgmental, confidential, and caring space where university online learners' stories are to be told, respectfully listened and made sense for informing future changes. It is known that there is the so-called 'dialogue with students' at some Vietnamese universities, but that dialogue does not go as deeply as the students wish for. Rather, I seek to see a flourishing conversation space where online learners can meet and talk with lecturers and administrators. As people are living in the Anthropocene, we are facing more pandemics and online learning is becoming more popular and challenging. But with much care and trust building for online teaching and learning experiences, online learners will holistically flourish.

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