
Gigging as Resilience: Managing emergent life situations and job transitions

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Abstract

Current discourse on life transition focuses on the role that social media platforms such as Facebook play in enabling people to navigate life disruptions. Yet, little is known about how gig platforms help people through emergent life situations and transitions. With China's booming gig economy, a number of US K-12 teachers have begun offering their services via Chinese education gig platforms. This study reports on a qualitative interview study with 19 US gig teachers to explore their practices and motivations. We found that

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CHI 2020 Extended Abstracts, April 25–30, 2020, Honolulu, HI, USA.

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-6819-3/20/04.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3334480.XXXXXXX>

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teachers are subjected to emotional labor and face systematic marginalization in traditional contexts. Gig platforms enable teachers to reconfigure their daily routines and to manage emergent life situations. However, additional challenges and emotional work are also created, subduing teachers. We then conclude discussing the importance to further understand how gig platforms are a social technology that can help people build resilience while in transition.

Author Keywords

Interview; Qualitative Methods; Gig Economy; Emotional Labor; Learning, Education and Family.

CSS Concepts

• **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; User studies; Human Factors, Empirical studies in HCI

Introduction

When professionals encounter transitions, which include job changes and emergent life situations, social support from family and friends has been an important avenue to help them go through predicaments. Advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have not only introduced new avenues for people to collaborate and communicate, but also the creation of

This project was initially inspired by the burgeoning of online gig education platforms in China, as well as news reports regarding US K-12 teachers embracing the gig economy to cope with their struggles in schools. To guide our study, we focused on the following research questions:

RQ1: What are US K12 teachers' motivations on online gig platforms?

RQ2: What are the challenges and perceived advantages of teaching online?

new forms of employment [20]. Such advancement in ICTs also enables people to build resilience, meaning people's ability to bounce back from threat or vulnerability [11] in transition. ICTs have unshackled normative working structures by enabling new types of work organization that grant additional flexibility and assign works based on demand and availability[7]. One of the most salient trends is the rise of the "gig economy", which refers to "individuals performing small tasks as independent contractors through digital platforms." [1].

In this study we focus on the job transition of US K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade) brick-and-mortar teachers in the gig economy. Previous work on the gig economy has focused on popular platforms including TaskRabbit, Uber, Lyft and Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk)[20][8][16][2][12], covering topics including earnings[9], employment bias[8], cost-benefits risks[6], legal concerns[1][20], income disparity[3][5], and information infrastructure[17]. Recently, a growing body of research on the gig economy has focused on Algorithmic control[18]; for instance, researchers have discovered that Uber is a totalitarian system as it utilizes algorithmic-based management[13], "automated implementation of company policies" to discipline drivers' behaviors and practices[15]. However, there is a dearth of work to understand gig platforms through the lens of resilience in an education setting. This study intends to fill the gap.

We focus on VIPKid, the largest education gig platform in China, which offers Chinese children 25-minute one-on-one online English lessons from native speakers in North America. VIPKid was founded by Chinese entrepreneur Cindy Mi in 2013. Currently, it is the largest platform of its kind, with over 600,000 students

and 70,000 teachers. Other similar platforms include Gogokid and Whales English. Such platforms use live-streaming technology to create a real-time online English learning environment. Teachers are hired as independent contractors and are paid on a per-class basis.

Method

We interviewed 19 US brick-and-mortar schoolteachers from 14 states (15 white and 4 non-white) between March and April 2019. Our interviewees are well educated (nine BA and 10 MEd), with ages ranging from 27 to 58. To address our research questions, we applied qualitative methodology, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin[4] and Yin[19]. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 4.5 hours, averaging approximately 90 minutes each.

The interview protocol was designed to explore teachers' life histories and experiences gigging online. We asked about their life stories before, during, and after transitioning to gigging. At the end of the interview, we asked our interviewees if we could friend them on social media networks or access their gig platform profiles, as we saw these as important sources from which to retrieve and validate prior experience.

We used an approach derived from grounded theory [4] to analyze our interview data. We conducted interactive and inductive analyses of the 19 interview transcriptions using open coding and memoing, followed by different levels of analysis. Several codes - which included managing emergent life situations, feeling burned out, being treated like glorified babysitters, and feeling underappreciated - emerged. Then, we created different categories for the emergent

Teachers perform emotional labor in school

Obviously people, they praise teachers or praise you for wanting to become a teacher, but teaching is looked at as kind of second rate (laugh) as far as other people's perception of education in general; people like to say that it's a noble profession, but they definitely don't treat it as such. (T6)

The people I worked with, like lived, ate, slept, and breathed working for their students in the classroom; it happened to me... I don't regret working in an environment like that, but at this point in my life, I can't be that kind of crazy anymore, because I have my own children who need to stay alive, and I have to put my own children ahead of the students that I teach. (T10)

codes and reached a consensus on distinct themes after collapsing and merging codes.

Results

Motivation and challenges in teaching

Teachers have a very strong propensity for social good. Their motivations to teach are emotionally tied and deeply embedded in their identities, where identity is defined as a person's self-concept[11]. Among 19 interviewees, 13 perceive teaching as a natural choice, as it aligns well with their personalities. However, emotionally taxing brick-and-mortar teaching and a stifled educational infrastructure inhibits teachers' ability to adapt to new changes, as we next describe.

Consistent with prior research, we found that teachers perform emotional work in brick-and-mortar institutions[21][14]. The majority of teachers experience burnout from their work. They spend significant time and energy engaging in non-teaching-related work, including dealing with students' behavioral issues. Teachers also reported facing diminishing respect from students' parents, institutions, as well as society in general (e.g., with teaching being viewed as a second-rate profession (T6) and with teachers being treated like glorified babysitters).

A stifled education infrastructure imposes additional challenges to teachers. Most of our interviewees revealed that they experience financial struggles, low pay, and static salaries. This rigid system also doesn't offer enough support to teachers who experience changes in their lives. When P10 found out that her job couldn't really support her family, she had to resign.

After becoming a new mother, T14 experienced tiredness due to a lack of sleep, but she said that she was still expected to "give a hundred percent" without any excuses.

Gig platforms enable resilience

We found that education gig platforms enable resilience by offering teachers a way to positively reconfigure their lives. Our interviewees revealed that such a system facilitates a way to manage emergent life situations such as having children (T2, T3), retirement (T12, T17), job changes (T3, T4, T9, T10), and meeting family needs (T5, T6, T8, T13, T17). Six interviewees revealed that they are still passionate about teaching but they either feel stuck or no longer want to teach in brick-and-mortar institutions. Gigging online became a desirable alternative for them. It also offers a support path for teachers who encounter severe sickness. T11, an Asian American teacher, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease back in 2013. Her illness changed the outlook of her career, as teaching in school became both physically and mentally challenging. In 2017, she resigned and moved to a different state. Missing the challenge of teaching, T11 signed up for to an online teaching platform, which allows her to continue her teaching practice.

Such education platforms were designed in a way that enables teachers to follow their initial motivation while helping them to reconfigure their life. Teachers are allocated based on their availability and expertise, which affords them "flexibility", as reported by 15 interviewees. Teachers are also paid by the number of classes they teach, with a competitive rate. The system also transforms the teaching environment from an individualistic to a collective one through livestreaming.

Reconfiguring emotional labor via gigging:

I didn't have any alternatives, what I knew, and had I had another option, I don't know that I would have chosen to go back into teaching. It was a necessity, I needed to get a job, and that was the easiest job I could get, because I was used to it, and it was the norm... I was looking for an alternative to get out of the situation that I'm in. This [gigging] looks like a very good alternative (T19)

I am working at my current job, but I would like to also have something on the side. Our plan is that once we do get pregnant and have a baby, I most likely won't be going back to my brick-and-mortar job, I would only be doing something like VIPKid at home so I'm able to have the flexibility to stay home with my children. (P3)

Teachers also benefit from the differences in US and Chinese attitudes toward teachers. Instead of being treated as “equals”[10], the teachers are placed at the center of the education process and granted with respect. Most of our interviewees feel more respected by parents and students from China. Meanwhile, the majority of teachers’ non-teaching-related work is delegated or solved through design. Thirteen interviewees reported that they have a much lower workload and have more energy for their students and families due to the design of such platforms.

Embedded with collectivist values, online education platforms also enable the labor of teaching to transform from an individual labor to a collective labor, granting teachers autonomy and enabling resiliency. Our interviewees repetitively brought up the human mediators “learning partners” and “firemen” during the interview. Those are mediators hired by the platforms to alleviate teachers’ burdens. Such tasks are also delegated to artificial intelligence, to further eliminate teachers’ emotional labor. For instance, voice and facial recognition systems are used to report on students’ reaction rates and concentration levels. Auto-generated feedback is also sent to parents so that teachers’ feedback can mainly focus on what they teach in class.

Challenges in gigging

Our interviewees also reported challenges while teaching online. Despite AI offloading some of the teachers’ burdens, their teaching behaviors end up being under scrutiny. T3 revealed that she observed the company using algorithms to quantify her workload. For instance, a pay raise can depend on the number of classes taught, parents’ evaluations and class cancellations. Teachers also reported engaging in

emotional labor online due to the precariousness nature of gig work. To maintain a client base for steady income, our informants broadcast their daily activities via livestreaming and engage in substitute online teaching, investing additional hours to get higher ratings. Teachers employ strategies such as switching platforms and joining online communities to help to maintain their teaching presence. Despite the new challenges, among 19 interviewees, four teachers have switched to teaching online full time, while six plan to make the same move soon. The rest, meanwhile, rely on online platforms solely to manage emergent situations.

Conclusions

In our study, we found that the gig economy enables resilience by facilitating people to manage emergent situations such as having a baby, facing retirement, or changing jobs. Meanwhile, such a system also redirects emotional labor through collective design. However, as our teachers (emotional labor) make transitions from serving as full-time teachers in traditional environments to becoming part-time or full-time teachers through gig platforms, some of the emotionality of the new work remains; they still perform emotional labor after the transition. We propose to further understand how gig platforms as a sociotechnical system enable resilience among emotional labors. Such understanding could not only help us repurpose or build new systems to help professionals manage emergent situations, but also better support emotional workers transitioning from offline to online working environments in the gig economy.

Acknowledgements

I thank Bryan Semaan, my advisor, for his great mentorship, iSchool students Ruifeng Chen, Dinesh Challa and Guo Xiang for their comments and help with the transcription, and our interviewees for their time.

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