

**Learning, Course Satisfaction, and Community in the Time of COVID-19:  
Student Perceptions of the Switch to Emergency Remote Teaching**

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**Abstract.** This multiple descriptive case study explores how university students responded to their Business Communications course's transitioning to an emergency remote course during the spring semester of 2020. Thirty-nine students completed an end-of-semester questionnaire that recorded their impressions of learning and course satisfaction. Nine of those students also participated in semi-structured interviews about these topics. The data revealed that most students enjoyed and felt they learned more from their in-person course, they missed learning from their peers, and they missed the community that was created during the in-person class sessions that were suspended due to university-sanctioned COVID-19 protocols. This article discusses the need for instructors to integrate continuous interactive community into online courses and the need for universities to provide training for online instructors in this essential component in course preparation and execution.

In 2010, some scholars presciently advised, "with warnings of impending pandemics, universities need to be prepared to deliver courses in alternative ways to ensure continuity of instruction" (White et al., p. 34). In March of 2020, universities got to test this preparation or lack thereof when, due to sudden and unexpected COVID-19 protocols, all in-person courses switched to asynchronous online instruction. This situation presented a unique opportunity to assess the preparedness of universities and teachers by evaluating the perceived learning and course satisfaction differences of students during spring 2020. Like many other institutions, our university offered mostly in-person courses before the pandemic; as a result, many faculty members were not trained to implement the best practices in online education until the switch to remote learning. While our university began to train and address online course design after the switch to remote learning and in the summer that followed, it is instructive to consider the effects of having in-person instructors pivot to teach emergency online courses.

Other studies have begun to examine student learning (Lemay et al., 2021) and engagement (Castro & George, 2021) during this switch. Our study seeks to add to that body of knowledge by revealing the insights of student perceptions and experiences transitioning from in-person to online learning when they did not choose the latter and when these courses were taught by instructors accustomed to in-person teaching. Most in-person college students experienced this challenge in 2020. Our study provides a snapshot of what students likely experienced and provides recommendations on how to better prepare for future similar situations.

The following literature review provides a grounded research foundation for contextualizing the situation of how university students responded to the implementation of emergency remote teaching as a pandemic protocol. Because the course in this study functioned as a flipped classroom, the following review will briefly describe this pedagogical strategy and then summarize the differences in student learning, motivation, and enjoyment in online courses versus in-person courses.

## **Literature Review**

### **Flipped Classes**

The setting for the study is a highly interactive flipped-model Business Communications course. Students prepared for each class meeting by spending approximately one hour reading a text, an article, or watching a lecture posted on their Learning Management System. This pre-class preparation enabled students to engage in meaningful discussions and activities for a 50-minute class session three days a week. Research has shown better learning outcomes, student perceptions of learning, and student engagement in a flipped classroom model as compared to a traditional classroom (Baepler et al., 2014; Berrett, 2012; Deslauriers et al., 2011; Haak et al., 2011; Kong, 2014; Loveys & Riggs, 2019; Missildine et al., 2013). The flipped classroom model allows for active, deep learning, in which students interact with each other and the professor to apply the concepts they have learned about before class. Flipped classrooms such as those in the present study incorporate elements of online courses, such as readily available recorded lectures with in-person elements of discussion and group work activities. Since this study examines a switch from in-person to emergency remote teaching, it is relevant to consider which modality—online or in-person—research has shown to be superior for student learning and course satisfaction.

### **Online Versus In-person Classes**

Several studies have analyzed, with mixed results, which kind of course—in-person or online—enables students to learn more effectively. Some studies have found that in-person students perform better on exams than online students in the same course (Arias et al., 2018; Bettinger et al., 2015; Gibson, 2008), while other research shows students' grades as the same in both types of courses (Stack, 2015). Another study found that, although online students perform as well or better than in-person students in some evaluative measures (Means et al., 2009), in-person students demonstrate higher-level problem-solving skills than online students (Dendir, 2019).

In addition, Stark (2019) found lower levels of motivation to succeed in online versus in-person students. Online students believed their course was not as interesting and helpful as students in the same in-person course (Stark, 2019, p. 243). Further, online students reported that they sought less assistance from their classmates and their instructors than students in in-person courses (Stark, 2019, p. 244). An apparent weakness of online courses is the challenge of integrating meaningful interaction amongst students and sometimes also with the course instructor.

Some research shows that students enjoy the interaction in in-person courses better than in online courses, and flipped classrooms, in particular, allow for these in-person social interactions such as discussions and group application activities (Crews & Butterfield, 2014, p. 44). As a result of the desire for interaction, students have been found to feel greater satisfaction in their in-person courses than in their online courses (Gibson, 2008; Toufaily et al., 2018). Online students have reported less exposure to effective teaching practices and lower quality of peer and faculty interactions (Dumford & Miller, 2018). Though students tend to enjoy interactions with their professors and peers, students do value the flexibility of online courses (Crews & Butterfield, 2014). Also, some research indicates that when online courses are designed to incorporate student interaction, student satisfaction is as high in online courses as in in-person courses (Driscoll et al., 2012).

In many studies, comparing in-person and online courses has been problematic due to self-selection bias in the studies' sampling protocols (Zimmerman, 2020). Students typically register for the course modality that they prefer. The spring of 2020 allowed for an unusual study because the students did not elect to take an online course. Previous research has evaluated planned online environments, a modality that students chose. It should be noted that the emergency remote teaching of spring 2020 was different from online courses, which instructors usually design in advance (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Therefore, one should not expect the excellence of regular online courses to be consistent with emergency remote teaching. This study contextualizes the spring 2020 student experience and addresses to what extent this emergency remote experience was similar or dissimilar to what research has found on planned online courses. This study can help us understand some best practices applicable to online course design and facilitation. It is also valuable to understand students' perceptions during emergency remote teaching to prepare better plans in case of a future disaster. According to Hodges et al. (2020), "the possible need for [emergency remote teaching] must become part of a faculty member's skill set, as well as professional development programming for any personnel involved in the instructional mission of colleges and universities" (para. 26).

The theoretical frameworks used to evaluate students' perceptions of their course modality's change are cognitive learning (Frymier & Houser, 1999, p. 8) and course satisfaction (Crosby & Stevens, 1987). These frameworks guided the questions we asked the students in both the questionnaire and focus-group interviews.

### **Research Questions**

Guided by the review of literature, the overarching purpose of the study, and the applied theoretical frameworks, the following research questions were posed as the focal frame of inquiry for this multiple descriptive case study:

1. Were students more satisfied with their in-person or remote courses, and why?
2. How did students perceive that the quantity and quality of their learning changed when transitioning from an in-person course to an asynchronous online version?

3. How did students' perceptions of formerly interactive courses versus lecture-oriented ones change when they switched to a remote format?
4. Did the students' sense of classroom community, from their interactive flipped classroom the first half of the semester, continue when they transitioned to emergency remote teaching?
5. What were students' most significant challenges in switching from an in-person to an online course?

### **Methods**

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), the qualitative research paradigm emphasizes an inductive inquiry process exploring and understanding social and human problems. Grounded in the qualitative research paradigm, case study methodology can provide an in-depth look into complex social phenomena in real-life contexts (Yin, 2013). Therefore, the rationale for this study's application of a multiple case study research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) includes the "real-life" unique circumstances where a global COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted human interactions and institutional operations. Consequently, educational institutions were forced to disband in-person instructional models and immediately implement online technology-enabled teaching models.

Since this course was already being conducted using a flipped classroom model, students continued to access the content online but missed the in-class activities and discussions when the course switched to an asynchronous online format. Essentially, the course became only pre-class activities on the Learning Management System, such as watching videos and completing assigned readings. What was lost in this course was the in-class application of the learning material. Due to the sudden pivot from an in-person to an online model of learning and instruction, the professor did not add additional synchronous meeting requirements or discussion boards. Students' required and monitored interactions during the remote portion were through four peer reviews on a discussion board. In groups of three or four, students also had to finish the group project they started at the beginning of the semester. During remote learning, these groups were instructed to communicate virtually to complete checkpoints for their project, but the instructor did not monitor their communication. Students continued to receive audio and written feedback on assignments from their professor and were encouraged to email or call her when they had questions.

During the switch to emergency remote teaching, our university began offering resources on online teaching to faculty members. The Academy for Teaching and Learning launched a website called "Keep Teaching" that included text resources about online course instruction. The university also offered Online Teaching Commons, an informal support group for instructors, and webinars on topics such as PowerPoint slides for online courses.

We applied two sampling protocols in this multiple case study to obtain the most comprehensive data. The first round of sampling involved a criteria-based purposive sampling protocol (Patton, 2002) drawn from 39 students enrolled in a Business Communications course at a private university in the southwestern United States. The 39 students were provided an online questionnaire with four open-ended

questions, asking their perceptions of cognitive learning and course satisfaction (see Appendix). The second round involved nine students who chose to participate in semi-structured interviews that extended their perceptions of the impact of a switch from an in-person classroom instructional model to an unelected online instructional model on their cognitive learning and course satisfaction.

The qualitative data collection protocol for this study involved semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom by one of the study's authors, who also served as an instructor for the Business Communications course in which the students were enrolled. Pattern matching, within-case framework analysis, and cross-case thematic analysis were the three data analysis protocols used to establish qualitative data trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The narrative data were coded using a pattern matching process applied during both the framework within-case and thematic cross-case analysis procedures (Miles et al., 2014). Although qualitative case study data do not allow for statistical generalizability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Stake (1978) explain that a case study can be a powerful tool for establishing theoretical generalizations based on personal experiences.

The narrative data presented in the following results and discussion sections represent the perceptions of how university students in a Business Communications course responded to the suspension of an in-person instructional model and the switch to an online instructional model during the 2020 spring semester.

## Results

In Table I: Within-Case Analysis, a summary of all nine focus-group participants' answers to questions about their perceptions of learning and course satisfaction is provided. Afterward, four of the most insightful heterogeneous cases are discussed, highlighting each participant's perceptions on how transitioning from an in-person classroom experience to an asynchronous online experience impacted his or her sense of course satisfaction and overall effect on cognitive learning. Vic's responses are essentially representative of the five other cases.

**Table 1**

*Within-Case Analysis*

<b>Student Participating in Focus Group Interview</b>	<b>Perception of Learning</b>	<b>Perception of Course Satisfaction</b>
Andrea	Greater in-person due to distractions at home	Missed socializing with classmates and community in the classroom
Charice	Greater in class because she learned from classmates in discussion	Missed interaction and discussion with classmates
Brandon	Learned a lot more in class because of the ease of asking questions	Doing group work in class and seeing each other was more fun than virtual communication

**Table 1 Cont.**

<b>Student Participating in Focus Group Interview</b>	<b>Perception of Learning</b>	<b>Perception of Course Satisfaction</b>
Heidi	Learned more in-person due to discussions	The in-person class allowed her to meet new people, which was more enjoyable than seeing just people’s names in an online context
Vic	Learning through discussing in class is more engaging than doing the work at home	In-person classes are more engaging and enjoyable
Sara	Talking about the material in class helped her learn better	Enjoyed groupwork more in class than online
Ernest	Learned more in class because he was able to pay better attention	Enjoyed the social aspect of talking to his friends before, after, and during class
Ginny	Discussing and problem-solving in class was engaging and solidified the material in her long-term memory	Enjoyed in-person class more because of interaction with classmates and instructor and convenience of understanding and completing assignments
Andy	Learned more in class because the interaction with classmates and instructor made him more motivated to care about the subject	Preferred in-person class because of the routine it provided and because online he missed seeing friends and maintaining a relationship with the professor

Case One: Andrea moved from her university in central Texas to her family’s home in Chicago when the university transitioned to emergency remote teaching. Suddenly, she found herself responsible for not only school and work but also hefty family responsibilities. She explained that her family faced challenges of aging grandparents, which heightened her domestic duties. For example, she regularly cooked dinner for her father and siblings and did laundry for the entire household. Andrea emphasized that she enjoyed in-person learning over online learning. Calling her situation “tumultuous,” she admitted that her coursework was challenging to balance with her other family responsibilities. Andrea also missed the community that her class provided for her:

I think that there’s so much of a social aspect that I get from college.... I’ve been able to meet so many different characters in college, and that really affects how happy I am. The sociability aspect of our class (I met so many people in your class...), and I think that really affected how much I enjoyed it because I enjoyed the people in it. I’d go in every day excited to not only learn

the material but also talk to these people who are maybe not friends yet but acquaintances that I enjoy. There's a sociable aspect that you can't get online.

Andrea conceded that, in contrast, she did not miss as much her more traditional classes that mainly consisted of lectures.

Case Two: Charice is an international student from Nigeria who, unlike Andrea, could not go home during the pandemic because of limitations on international travel. Though she admitted being distracted by family concerns that her parents were out of work and her grandparents were staying with them, she was in her off-campus apartment completing her online courses. Charice admitted that she does not usually enjoy online classes. Like Andrea, Charice believed she was learning and enjoying the course more when meeting in class because of the frequent discussions and group work conducted during class. She stated that while she was learning from her professor and the posted content materials, she was not learning from her peers, which compromised the depth of her learning. Charice was also bothered by the inefficiency of communication through technology, explaining that a lag exists between when a message is sent and when a message is received. She emphasized that her group communicated much more quickly when meeting in class rather than through video conferencing or group texting.

Case Three: Brandon is a student from out of state, but, like Charice, he had to stay in his off-campus apartment throughout the pandemic because he contracted COVID-19 through his workplace. He volunteered that everyone at his workplace near campus contracted the virus, and his case was asymptomatic, though he felt tired. He admitted that the worst result of acquiring the virus was the lonely nature of isolation in his apartment for two weeks. Like Andrea and Charice, Brandon also believed that he enjoyed the course and learned more from the in-person class, primarily because of the distractions he experienced in his apartment. Brandon agreed with Charice that communication was more efficient in person. He liked visiting the professor's office hours or speaking to her after class instead of emailing her. Brandon commented that he enjoyed seeing his classmates in person, and he admitted that being in class was "a lot more fun than shooting a text or Facetimeing not as often." He missed in-person class participation.

Case Four: In contrast to the previous three students, Vic represents the other five focus group students. When his courses moved online, he traveled home to continue his studies. Vic and all the other students interviewed believed that he learned and enjoyed the course more when it met in person. He admitted that, like Brandon, procrastination was a great temptation for him at home. The regularity of in-person class meetings kept him accountable to complete assignments and think about the course multiple times each week rather than waiting until the deadline to do the readings, watch the videos, and complete the assignments. Vic also admitted that being physically present in a classroom kept him accountable to participate meaningfully in a discussion. He stated,

Being in the classroom helps you learn more. It...forces me to engage and participate and now that I'm sitting in my room with nobody around me...I

just feel like I'm not personally engaged. So, I...go through the motions and read the assignments and just do them and then say that's that.

Vic was not the only student who described the online portion of the course this way. In the questionnaires, students described the remote version of the course as "going through the motions," "busywork," and even "an absolute chore." When the course transitioned to an online format, it became less meaningful and enjoyable.

Being alone in an online environment was demotivating for Vic, unlike the in-person classroom that helped him with accountability and engagement. Vic elaborated that

being in-person and having all those kids around you and doing those exercises...even if you don't know those people and you don't speak to them outside the classroom, it makes you more comfortable with them in-person because...you're all...there and you all know what to expect. You all know each other. Like how we all think and what everyone has to say. And I think it's a very community-based feel and...not having that anymore, it just...totally changes the feel of the course. And it...totally changes...the motivation to do it.

Table 2: Cross-Case Analysis shows common themes that emerged in the open-ended questions that 39 students completed on the questionnaire and the transcripts of the nine focus group interviews. This table also indicates how frequently each theme was referenced during the focus groups and in the combined questionnaire data.

**Table 2**

*Cross-Case Analysis*

<b>Common Theme</b>	<b>Frequency of Theme</b>
Students noted various benefits of in-person learning with others.	34
Students enjoyed interacting with each other and the professor when meeting in the classroom.	25
In-person classes provided a helpful routine and spaced-out assignments to minimize procrastinating and cramming, which happened in the online version.	17
Classwork became burdensome and seemed irrelevant online.	11
Distractions at home hindered learning, and in-person classes enabled focused learning.	7

Through both within-case and cross-case analysis of the narrative and questionnaire data, five themes emerged as significant data points that align with the study's research questions and the theoretical framework of student learning and course satisfaction:

1. Benefits of learning with others
2. Enjoyment of relationships, community, and social interaction
3. Challenges from a lack of routine and structure
4. Loss of the course's overarching purpose
5. Distractions at home in contrast to in-person classes that enable students to focus

These themes will be discussed in answering each of the study's research questions.

### **Question 1: Course Satisfaction**

The students in this study largely enjoyed in-person meetings more than remote learning. Only two of the 39 students surveyed enjoyed the online version more; one of these students specified that his or her satisfaction was due to the flexibility and convenience of an online course. However, in the questionnaire and focus group interviews, 37 out of 39 students reported enjoying interacting and building friendships with their peers and their professor in the classroom. They found accountability in their in-person classes helpful, and they felt they could manage their time in an in-person class better. Also, all nine focus group students reported that the sense of community they built during the first part of the semester in the in-person class declined and caused them to be less satisfied with the course when it transitioned to an emergency remote format. For example, one focus group student, Ginny, reflected that online, she felt "left on my own." She acknowledged that although the remote version helped her become more independently motivated, she admitted, "I'm not enjoying it nearly as much without the interaction."

When students in the focus groups admitted that their sense of community was lost during the last half of the semester, we asked them if discussion board assignments may have helped. Out of eight students who answered this question, six admitted that required discussion boards would feel like drudgery rather than an enjoyable aspect of the course. One student admitted that discussion board assignments might be helpful, and one other student thought that discussion boards would not be pleasant but that they may be beneficial for accountability and learning.

### **Question 2: Quantity and Quality of Learning**

In both the questionnaire data and the focus group interviews, students saw multiple benefits of learning in-person with others, such as accountability, ease of asking questions, discussion, and being forced to talk about concepts. Students said they did their work more thoroughly in an in-person class because they didn't want to feel embarrassed during discussion. Also, the format of in-person classes made students see the course as essential and worthwhile. Once their courses started meeting remotely, the importance of the course content was diminished for students.

### **Question 3: Difference Between Interactive and Lecture Classes Online**

In addition to Andrea's admission that she did not miss her lecture-oriented

courses as much as her interactive ones, another focus group student, Sara, indicated that for this flipped course, she preferred meeting in person. However, in other lecture-oriented courses, she liked the emergency remote versions. Sara shared,

I just feel the other courses...being online was okay because all we would do in the in-person courses are read the professor's PowerPoint presentations. But now he's reading the PowerPoints on our computers. Online was better because I could stop and take notes and do it on my own time. In this course, we wouldn't necessarily have lectures. We had more discussions.

She also believed that she learned more when her flipped classroom met in person than when the course transitioned to an online format. According to Garrison (2017), past research showed no difference between in-person and e-learning outcomes when in-person classes had the goal of merely conveying content verbally because in both types of courses students are left to absorb and interpret the course content individually (p. 87). Most participants in another study comparing online versus in-person lecture-oriented courses indicated that they preferred the online version because of convenience and easy access to lectures (White et al., 2010). This finding explains why Sara and Andrea liked their lecture-oriented courses more when they were online versus their interactive courses, which they enjoyed more in-person.

#### **Question 4: Continuing Classroom Community**

Even though students were completing projects in groups of three to five during the emergency remote portion of the semester, all nine students in the focus groups reported not experiencing community and meaningful interaction in the remote version of the course and noted that, as a result, they were not learning as much when the course became online only. Importantly, our study shows that in-person courses uniquely offer students opportunities to build relationships organically through pre-and post-class conversation.

#### **Question 5: Greatest Challenges of the Transition to Remote Learning**

Students widely agreed that meeting in person helped them manage their time more effectively because they had set routines and fewer distractions. Students perceived that an established class schedule was conducive to learning because it forced them to fill up their days and space out their workload throughout the week. In synchronous classes, time is set aside for students, which helps them pace themselves through the journey of mastering concepts. When participating in courses online, students reported that they often "crammed" too much material into one set time instead of pacing themselves. They believed that spacing out the material would help them learn it better.

Additionally, students believed that the in-person classroom environment allows them to focus. Whereas at home, they were distracted by personal lives, other

people, entertainment, and procrastination, in person they focused on their professor, their learning, and the content of the course.

Students also found that collaborating with other students for their group projects was more efficient and enjoyable when meeting in person. This finding is consonant with other research that online courses deter collaborative learning (Dumford & Miller, 2018) or make collaboration more time-consuming (Lee et al., 2016). Probably, students needed training to use online meeting tools and accountability to utilize them regularly. Still, asynchronous online courses pose the challenge of students scheduling times to meet rather than having in-person class time for their group work.

### **Discussion**

Confirmed by narrative data, this study presents the need for online instructors to be creative and thoughtful in their efforts to go beyond posting static course content. Moreover, the study serves as a guide for educators as they prepare to be more effective in future emergency remote teaching situations.

#### **The Need for Community for Learning**

This study reveals the error in assuming that learning happens in an isolated context in online (or emergency remote) courses. According to Garrison (2017), the most significant mistake of traditional distance education design has been the assumption that students learn apart from a community. Echoing Garrison's belief, Wenger (1998) explains that learning is fundamentally social and consists of both participation in and reification of concepts:

Learning is a matter of engagement: it depends on opportunities to contribute actively to the practices of communities that we value and that value us, to integrate their enterprises into our understanding of the world, and to make creative use of their respective repertoires. (1998, p. 227)

Charice's reflection in the focus group shows this reality:

I was learning more in class when in person and also just because of the nature of our course, discussion-based. You would teach us, and we would all discuss and have the group work, so I think that worked better for me—the kind of learning that I do. Online learning is very personal, so I'm learning from you, but I'm not learning from other people's experiences and what they contribute.

Other students in the present study had similar comments, such as "I miss seeing my friends [and]...bounc[ing] off the ideas of other classmates and hear[ing] what their contributions are." Another student admitted, "For me, it's just easier and more effective to process the material through interacting and discussing." Rather than assuming that online learning means isolated learning, instructors must find ways to establish collaboration in their online courses as they would in in-person courses. As Hewson (2018) notes, it is tempting for online instructors to get into a content-

publishing mentality, which does not give students the interactive experience they enjoy and need for deep learning.

Students in this study indicated that they missed social presence, which is “the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities” (Garrison, 2017, p. 25). Asynchronous, text-based online courses have a particular challenge of cultivating social presence due to students’ lack of immediacy with one another and with their professors (Garrison, 2017, p. 26). Therefore, instructors must be creative with ensuring that social presence is achieved in their online courses. As Garrison (2017) asserts, students must feel that they belong to a meaningful, cohesive community of co-learners. Because of how crucial social presence is in the learning process, online instructors must consider how best to facilitate community in their courses. Online instructors should determine how they will build social presence at the outset of creating a new course, with activities such as team projects (Budhai & Skipwith, 2017, p. 62). Social presence might also extend to include the instructor’s presence, which professors can enhance by sending a personalized text to students (Robertson et al., 2021). Students in online courses want a connection with their professors, and they want to connect with their classmates, too. They will be more engaged in a course if they feel connected to the people in it with them (Buelow et al., 2018). Research has shown that student engagement increases student satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses (Martin & Bollinger, 2018).

### **The Necessity of Planning and Training**

As one might expect, this study confirms previous research that failing to plan for collaborative learning is detrimental to students’ learning and satisfaction (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 10). The necessity of pivoting to emergency remote teaching sacrificed planning for interaction, which sacrificed learning.

An online course must be designed with community-building in mind. The community of inquiry framework is well-suited to guide online instructors in their course creation, as instructors consider developing social presence within their online courses. Well-designed communities of inquiry enable students to share ideas and personal reflections and apply the content to their collective experiences (Garrison, 2017, p. 23). Thus, students in a community of inquiry make the content personal and meaningful (p. 23). As some other instructors have demonstrated, finding ways to create a community in an online course should be a primary goal (Hulett, 2019).

Therefore, if a university must switch in-person courses to an online format, the university should provide training in community-building before the next crisis that converts in-person instructors to online teachers. Faculty members like the first author, an in-person and online instructor for over eight years, perhaps don’t in practice realize what research shows about the importance of community in learning. The pandemic exposed this lack in this instructor’s course. It is well-documented in the literature that professors of online courses need technological training and instructional design support (Blau et al., 2018), but it is also crucial that universities

provide training on community-building, which is essential yet challenging in remote courses more so than in-person courses. Other research has shown that, unlike in our findings, students showed equal satisfaction in online courses compared to in-person courses when the online courses were designed to promote a high degree of interaction between the students and the instructor and among the students themselves (Driscoll et al., 2012). The disparity between that study and the present one reveals ineffective course design in the latter due to the abrupt shift and the instructor's ignorance about the importance of online learning communities. With emergency remote teaching, instructors did not have time to plan excellent online courses (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 4). Nevertheless, this disparity underscores the need for training online instructors and empowering them to use tools that promote frequent, meaningful interaction in online courses. Instructors can have significantly better outcomes with students if they plan for socialization in their classrooms (Irwin & Berge, 2006, p. 6). As Vlachopoulos (2020) opined, "technology itself doesn't guarantee an effective—or pleasant—learning experience. This can only be achieved through systematic training initiatives..." (para. 11).

#### **The Need for Continual Community-Building Throughout a Course**

A worthwhile finding of this study is that initial community-building will not sustain itself all semester. Research has shown that icebreakers are helpful for learner-to-learner engagement in online courses (Bollinger & Martin, 2018), but instructors should not expect that an icebreaker is sufficient for learner-to-learner engagement throughout a course. A learning community that is built must be cultivated. In this study, students had an interactive flipped classroom for the first half of the semester; even so, it wasn't enough to sustain learning and enjoyment throughout the semester. There must be continual community-building and mutual learning opportunities throughout the semester.

As instructors must put forth intentional effort to find meaningful ways for students to engage with each other, they should not assume that discussion boards are a fix-all for community building. One focus group student described a sentiment that was common to multiple focus group students, that discussion boards are "not at all like going and sitting next to someone and...getting to know their name and just chatting, so...they turn into another assignment." Another student agreed and said that discussion boards are a "checklist item" and that "there wouldn't be a whole lot of heart behind that." Research has shown that when students post discussions asynchronously, they are less engaged than in real-time conversations (Irwin & Berge, 2006). Also, because text-based discussion boards do not allow facial expression or body language richness, these media do not promote ideal engagement (Budhai & Skipwith, 2017, pp. 73-74). Students consider them beneficial when discussions are structured with guiding questions or prompts to deepen their understanding of the content (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Incorporating videos as part of discussions may also help due to the richer communication medium. The quality of discussion board questions matters, as well. Instructors can promote learner engagement online by creating thought-provoking questions, which have a real-world application to significant social issues and allow students to apply their personal experiences and

read others' personal experiences (Buelow et al., 2018). When discussion board questions are not high quality, they may appear to students as busywork (Buelow et al., 2018). Finally, if instructors are actively involved in discussions, learners might have a greater sense of belonging (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Mere interaction is insufficient to make an online course effective; students must interact in highly intellectual, social, and emotional ways (Lee & Bonk, 2016). However, as our study found, a weakness inherent in online education is the lack of informal, spontaneous conversation that students naturally engage in when they sit next to each other.

### Conclusion

Colleges and universities need to prepare for future events that might cause courses to transition quickly to an online format, and this study reveals some of the areas that may need additional preparation. Universities should train not only online faculty members but also in-person instructors who need to prepare to teach online in another emergency. Training should include creating and facilitating meaningful interaction between students or communities of inquiry. Students also need training in remote communication tools and probably direction and accountability from their professor to regularly collaborate with their group members.

While all case study researchers should be cautious in drawing broad conclusions from a small data set, this study is supported by an extensive literature review coupled with a robust analysis of data pulled from a highly reliable participant sample. The study's participants' perceptions and experiences confirm the importance of semester-long interactions to promote deep learning and student satisfaction. Consequently, if an emergency remote version of a flipped classroom consists of only the posted course content, students will miss the most beneficial parts of the course, which balance both depths of content exploration and breadth of experiential application. Students in this study may have been more sensitive to the loss of the highly interactive learning community than students who may have never experienced this environment and therefore are less inclined to note the absence. However, this study has confirmed other research that online courses without thoughtful and meaningful interactions lead to negative impressions from student participants (Tang et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study underscores the importance of using creativity to build community among students. Whether instructors plan online courses or face an emergency online course like what they experienced in the spring of 2020, institutions need to ensure that proper pedagogical training about community-building is in place. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed weaknesses in our response systems in providing quality learning and teaching delivery models. However, we may now attempt to better prepare for a future contingency and train in-person instructors in creative methods that promote students' sense of community and, thus, academic success.

## Disclosure Statement

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire and Interview Questions for Participants

1. When did you feel you were learning more in our course: when it was meeting in person or since it has been online? Why?
2. Have you enjoyed our course more as an in-person course or as an online course? Explain.
3. Did you think about the course content more when we were meeting in-person or since it has been online? Explain.
4. Are you spending more time watching videos, doing the readings, and completing assignments on the course now, as an online course, or did you spend more time completing work and assignments on the course when we met in person? Explain.

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