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## Pandemic Lessons: Reflections on Transitioning to Remote Learning

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**Pandemic Lessons: Reflections on Transitioning to Remote Learning**

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**ABSTRACT:** The COVID-19 global pandemic necessitated a rapid transition to remote learning (synchronous or asynchronous) for higher education institutions. This paper documents lived experiences of this occurrence from the perspectives of a graduate student, an instructional designer, and a professor. There is discussion of strategies that facilitated a smooth transition to remote learning and recommendations regarding online education.

*Keywords: pandemic, remote learning, higher education*

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### **Pandemic Lessons: Reflections on Transitioning to Remote Learning**

The rapid transition to remote online learning, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges, not the least of which was ensuring the continuation of education for students at tertiary educational institutions. This commentary documents lived experiences of moving to remote learning from the perspectives of an educational team including a graduate student, an instructional designer, and a professor at a small public university. These observations provide insight into varied responses to the transition to remote learning, identify strategies that facilitated a smooth change to remote learning, and delineate recommendations that may be useful in other time-sensitive situations.

The educational team is affiliated with the University of Nebraska at Kearney, a small public institution in the Midwestern region of the U.S. During 2020, the student population at University of Nebraska at Kearney was approximately 6225 (4385 undergraduate students, 1840 graduate students). Of that population, approximately 64% identified as female, 33% identified as first-generation students, 10% identified as Hispanic (<https://www.unk.edu/>). The timeline of transitioning to remote learning could be recreated using emails from administrative personnel at this institution. One of the first notices about the novel coronavirus (as it was referred to initially) was received in January 2020 from the office of student health. The message described viral symptoms and identified the origin of the virus. In early March, the university system started issuing directives related to the coronavirus, including recommendations to develop contingency plans in case there was a need to switch to remote learning. By mid-March 2020 the official notice to suspend in-person classes was issued. At that time there were no reported coronavirus cases in the area, but students had the option to remain on campus or return home. Ancillary services (e.g., student health service, campus housing, cafeteria, etc.) remained open. The university, however, planned to suspend in-person classes effective March 30, after spring break, but gave faculty the option to transition to remote learning before spring break once students were aware of this change. Faculty also had the freedom to teach their classes synchronously or asynchronously.

The following reflections document lived experiences of a graduate student, an instructional designer, and a professor impacted by the rapid transition to remote learning. Each reflection is written in the author's own voice and provides the writers' unique first-person perspectives.

#### **Reflection 1 – Graduate Student in Clinical Mental Health Counseling (Colton Nisley, B.S.)**

Engaging in a new journey as a graduate student at the same university where I had achieved my undergraduate degree provided a comforting choice for my next stage in life. Ideas of familiarity in structure, community, and academics filled my head with eagerness and elation. Entering into my courses, I familiarized myself with fresh new territory, committing to what this venture would entail while sitting in class every week. My mind was taken elsewhere with each habitual notification “buzz” on my phone during the first few weeks of school in January 2020: news outlets updating me on an unfamiliar, inchoate virus that seemingly only got closer to home each time my phone lit up.

Within a short time, the anxiety set quicker in our minds than the virus in our bodies and our traditional mode of academics moved virtually. As students, there was no choice other than to adapt. This adjustment showed all the emerging counselors in our program, including myself,

how intensely we must rely on language of the body in our future professions. Clinical mental health counseling is rooted in practicing interpersonal communication, something that online classes simply could not replace. Over time, however, the feeling of inadequacy has slowly fallen to the wayside as I come close to finishing my first year in graduate school. The absence of this feeling may have come from fatigue, though I like to believe the answer is in resilience and the power of our spirits to adapt and persevere in a changing world around us.

Progressing in this next stage of life right out of undergrad, I was presented with choices about my adult identity. Focusing on an ideal self, one that would work during the day as a mental health technician at a local hospital and achieve my graduate degree at night. Working on the frontline of this pandemic in healthcare, we received pleasant messages of being “heroes” through our work. While boosting our lowered esteem, we still faced the challenge of being benevolent while maintaining our distance. Becoming inundated with patients affected by the pandemic provided insights that would otherwise go unnoticed. Social distancing efforts and quarantining individuals from their support systems, whether these be families, support groups, community assistance programs, or solely from their daily routines, generated unrest in the lives of many. Finding solace in our care, frontline workers had opportunities to see the influence COVID-19 had on mental health. The seemingly weekly modifications in precautions within healthcare were becoming arduous with each step, and only a shimmer of light was shining through at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

While enduring the gravity of a compassion-centered occupation, another prospect presented itself early in the timeline of COVID-19: performing research under supervision of a professor at my university. This was unique in my experience, having never physically met my supervisor or any members of the collaborative team. Nonetheless, gathering online every week has created a sense of community. A sense of mutual understanding among us in each meeting, appreciating combined efforts to move forward as researchers and research assistants. Otherwise, simple steps in our processes are interrupted by the inability to meet physically with one another. Somehow, the sharing of a screen has yet to truly substitute for real-life experience of discussion with one another. Yet we each prevail.

Venturing into a new identity of being an independent adult right out of college gave me the opportunity to become someone I had yet to meet. Being proud of my undergraduate experiences of involvement and the underappreciated social interactions that came with it, my cup had runneth over. Confident to exchange my undergraduate immersions for my new identity, entering graduate school only began providing this when it went online. Finding solace in our shared experiences through virtual learning, working remotely, collaborating as humankind has done for centuries. This shared experience has become similar to discussing the weather in conversation, referencing the malevolent energy of an invisible virus and how it weighs heavily on our lifestyles. A tried but true supplement to conversation, just as weather has been for millennia, it provides understanding, compassion, and kindness. These are the same themes that emerged in place of COVID-19 anxiety, themes that have brought us together while we are apart. As humans, we have experienced adversity since the dawn of creation, yet each time we adapt to hardship, we evolve in our being, we move forward and prevail as humankind.

### **Reflection 2 - Instructional designer (Olimpia Leite-Trambly, M.S.)**

On March 9, 2020, a Monday, I received an email asking if I could attend three meetings that were already set up to help try to prepare faculty in case campus closed due to the coronavirus. I remember initially wondering if this move was too sudden and whether it was necessary. A week later I was home with three kids ranging from 8 months to 6 years of age, working full time and trying to homeschool. Things changed so suddenly.

Due to the nature of my work, I was up and running with the necessary technology and skills to assist my faculty. In theory, I knew everything I could do; however, I was not mentally ready. But I had no choice; I had to adjust to the “new work environment.”

From my point of view, some instructors were technically ready; others had no idea if they were technically ready because they did not know what they needed. The truth was that instructors knew what to teach but did not know how to teach due to the circumstances. They had little guidance for how to switch from face-to-face to online, and no guidance at all about how much rigor they had to convey to their students.

In my opinion, regardless of their experience with online teaching and technology, most instructors were tied to their old ways. Even with all the advantages and flexibilities offered by technology, many instructors were still not ready to change. As an Instructional Designer, I had to use another hat, the “Help Desk” hat, and help instructors be ready to teach and to help students. Many times, I also had to use the same “Help Desk” hat to help students. I had to remind myself and try to convey to my instructors: “Do not look for perfection, let’s do our best and let’s learn along the way.” Everything was new. While working, teaching, and learning were important, everybody’s well-being was even more important. Learning took on another dimension – at the moment, we were all learning alongside our students, and we needed to keep moving forward. In reality, I believe teaching and learning moved to a different level. Rather than focus on the subject matter, we were focusing on how to guide students to use technology to learn and to collaborate while dealing with a new reality. This new reality was so different to everyone. We all became more aware that there is little consistency, and we had to be aware that not everyone had basic tools for success: reliable internet, a computer or other devices, and a set schedule for work or study.

The best approach was keeping things simple and accessible. Zoom became present in everybody’s life, not because it was the best choice, but rather because of its popularity. At first, Zoom seemed the best solution because it could be used synchronously and asynchronously. Over time, however, we all had to be aware of skills that were necessary to establish boundaries that had to be respected, such as

- (i) video recording (asynchronous meetings) or web conference (synchronous meetings)
- (ii) video or no video, audio, or no audio
- (iii) which physical space one should use so one is not showing too much of their personal space
- (iv) dress code
- (v) Zoom bombers
- (vi) virtual background

(vii) Zoom fatigue

So, teaching the subject matter was important; however, the items listed above were new things that the majority had to get used to when learning how to learn and how to teach.

Things will never get back to what they were before. I believe I learned to be more accessible, flexible, and most important, more aware of other's conditions. There was little downtime. Now we had to learn to use every single second. I had to be more efficient and help others. Now I needed to learn to take a step back and remember to take care of myself while taking care of others.

### **Reflection 3 – Professor (Toni Hill , Ph.D.)**

As a university professor, being aware of and adjusting to student issues is paramount. For my university in the Midwest region of the United States, COVID-19 came to campus as a matter of policy directives in March 2020. Instructors had to adjust all teaching, all course formats, and all student relations to accommodate a global pandemic within days.

Pre-COVID-19, most university professors identified three primary components as their collegiate obligation: specifically, teaching, research, and service. While it is arguable about the percent or importance of each component, the expectation is that all components must be met to a lesser or greater degree.

At my institution, teaching is the preeminent focus given the institution's historical emphasis on teaching. Secondary to teaching would be research. Many professors would identify teaching and research as equal in reality. Given the academic review necessary for promotion and tenure, advancing professors know that favorable progress requires teaching and research with limited service, but with research outweighing teaching. It is commonly accepted that no assistant professor advances to associate professor without being a solid teacher and researcher. The old adage "publish or perish" still holds true. There has been limited focus or allowances for technological skills and training needed to complete most if not all academic activity.

During the global pandemic, university professors were expected to transition quickly to remote teaching while maintaining teaching, research, and service obligations with an advanced level of technological knowledge that few possessed. Professors teaching face-to-face were expected to adjust course delivery by moving their physical classrooms and students swiftly online into virtual formats with only a few days' notice. Like an increasing number of other professors, I taught in multiple formats including face-to-face, blended (a hybrid of some face-to-face and online), and online.

With the notable exception of specialized disciplines of instructional design, most university professors are not trained or prepared for the technological skills needed to teach, research, or serve the current virtual college campus. Even experienced online professors had many challenges when moving teaching, research, and service online in the early days of the pandemic. The pandemic did not wait until professors (and others, including students) possessed and were trained on the latest technological tools. The pandemic did not wait for upgrades and integrations to be completed before initiating a crisis.

Research has shown that an instructor's self- perceived computer competence (self-efficacy) directly influences integration of computers in teaching (Gilakjani, 2013). The

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instructor who lacks knowledge about computers will be reluctant to incorporate technology. Some research shows this is passed on by the instructor's desire to show their authority related to computer technology, thus expanding their knowledge when teaching.

Almost immediately after the pandemic-forced move to online teaching, I noticed serious inequity among students in a class. There was and continues to be a great digital divide between students and the rest of the world. Some students owned or possessed the latest and greatest in technology, while others do not have basic technology. As an instructor, I had to learn new software, upgrades, or interfaces, then try to explain these to students. Instructors must be able to translate technology to student users.

The transition to remote learning precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for

- (i) technological devices such as laptops, desktops, tablets, and smartphones
- (ii) internet access (reliable, high speed, secure)
- (iii) technological knowledge
- (iv) technological support (technology changes regularly, new software developed, software updates, modifications)

The pandemic continues to spread globally. Unlike regional disasters such as floods or earthquakes, all parts of the globe and all generations have been affected by COVID-19. Within academia, all members of the community, including students, staff, and faculty, feel the pandemic's impact. For instance, there continues to be a need to advocate for student equity related to computer and internet access, and to advocate for faculty time and recognition related to online course delivery, including increased resource support.

The experience of transitioning to remote learning has led us to identify strategies and propose recommendations that may help support and sustain learning under other time-sensitive circumstances.

### **Recommendations**

- (i) Maintain a representative and diverse advisory board to assist in the identification of the technology needs of students, staff, and faculty.
- (ii) Increase the numbers of university professionals providing technical assistance with established ratio criteria for instructional designer to faculty numbers for support.
- (iii) Increase technical assistance for instructors, staff, and students.
- (iv) Develop a formula for supporting the entire academic community proportional to the need.
- (v) Provide credentials and incentives for students, staff, and faculty to enhance technical skills.
- (vi) Provide legislative support to ensure internet access is equitable and available, at least, locally throughout the state and region.

Enhance and develop business relationships to ensure all students have access to current, reliable, and adequate technology tools including phones and computers

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- (vii) Support student discounts for relevant software programs generally used by the campus
- (viii) Develop and maintain state, regional, and national allegiances to negotiate fair technology purchases to keep prices reasonable.
- (ix) Encourage a campus climate of flexibility and adaptability so that any need for unexpected change is embraced.

### **Conclusion**

There is already speculation that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed higher education irrevocably and globally in the use of technology and online platforms in course delivery (Ghazi Saidi et al., 2020; Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us in higher education to acknowledge and take advantage of opportunities for growth that the pandemic has highlighted.

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