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The Pandemic Teaching Journey: Challenges, Lessons Learned, and Opportunities

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Abstract: This article aims to highlight the challenges, lessons learned, and opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, pivoting from in-person to remote course delivery. The information shared is based on the experience of an instructor in the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), College of Education, Health and Human Sciences' Department of Educational Leadership. In addition, the paper will explore how teaching and learning shifted during the pandemic and was potentially reimagined for virtual environments, focusing on the role of faculty and engagement of students, emphasizing professional students.

A sudden disruption occurred to everyday life in March 2020, in which the world entered the traffic of a virtual space. It is important to frame this moment as a new way of communicating, connecting, teaching, and learning in higher education. This time of expansive pause in teaching and learning, from now until this pandemic passes, requires faculty and students to think of new ways of working together and adapting to the *new normal*. Since mid-March 2020, campuses have scurried to deliver courses through a virtual environment, online, and hybrid if at all possible. With this quick response to course delivery, faculty and students met challenges, barriers, and opportunities. Researchers throughout the world have already published studies on various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, particularly its consequences for students, faculty, schools, and universities. The following questions will address how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the role of faculty in higher education.

1. What are the challenges encountered as faculty and students entered into virtual spaces for classes?
2. What are lessons learned that will create better delivery of virtual classes?
3. What are new possibilities for virtual teaching and learning moving into the post COVID era?

Challenges Encountered with Virtual Teaching

As an instructor in the Department of Educational Leadership (EDL) in the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences (CEHHS) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO), teaching hybrid and online courses and in-person courses were familiar instructional models for me. However, shifting the in-person courses to a fully remote or synchronous instruction and learning environment presented a significant undertaking. Synchronous instruction refers to live lessons hosted in real-time using a video conference tool such as Zoom (Sheninger, 2020). From my reflective lens, moving to a remote teaching model at the beginning of the pandemic was overwhelming, with tech hurdles to jump and inherent challenges. One silver lining was that teaching to the screen provided every student with a front-row seat. The gallery allows every student to be visible to the instructor and one another. I encountered an initial obstacle when I assumed that in-person course content could be easily "inserted" into the remote environment without adaptations using Zoom video conferencing, our department's platform designated for remote teaching. The EDL instructional model for graduate courses and doctoral seminars encourages active participation and discussion. While this is a critical aspect of class time, it emerged that remote instruction would require a deliberate focus on students' engagement to spark conversation and provide a collaborative class experience using Zoom, more so than with in-person lessons. Therefore, the pandemic spotlighted the importance of professional development for faculty to learn effective teaching strategies for student engagement using the synchronous instructional model.

Another challenge I witnessed dealt with students' professional behavior and interactions on the screen during class time. It was essential to convey to students that the virtual platform was an actual classroom setting and displaying professional behavior was an expectation. It was astonishing that etiquette rules were needed to share expectations with students regarding professional behavior on Zoom. Mike Chappie (2020) stated that cultural

norms are usually established to guide student behavior in traditional classrooms. However, using Zoom can make social interactions challenging, especially when we do not have pre-established expectations.

In May 2020, UNO's EDL faculty recognized a need to apprise graduate and doctoral students on conduct displayed in synchronous classrooms. The EDL faculty decided a necessary strategy was to implement netiquette norms. "*Netiquette is the code of conduct applied to online spaces*" (Hollister, 2020). By June 2020, the EDL faculty created netiquette professional standards for students to include in all faculty syllabi. Early on, EDL faculty who were teaching graduate students often discussed their concerns regarding teaching to a screen of " black boxes." It was frustrating to determine students' level of engagement and interaction from behind the "black boxes." One of the expectations in EDL classes and seminars was to turn cameras on so that students could be "physically" visible and actively engaged (Keiser et al., 2020).

Students were reminded in the UNO Educational Leadership Department's (EDL) Netiquette Standards that *"It is important to realize that video conferencing is an entirely new interactive experience for many, which requires adapting one's perspective, habits, and tactics to make it work effectively for you, other students, and faculty"* (Keiser et al., 2020). Sathasivan (2020) noted that the purpose of providing Zoom etiquette standards is twofold: for faculty to get to know their students and to create a community of practice among peers. These standards illustrated the importance of communicating expectations on how to engage in a virtual environment with others through chat and breakout rooms, as well as how to display professional behavior despite being at home with the convenience of taking care of home obligations.

Lastly, the pandemic has affected the mental and emotional well-being of faculty. I can attest to the past year of my six years as an EDL faculty member; it has been the most tiring, unnerving, and yet the most intense learning experience of my career. I realized that planning for lessons, advising and meeting with students, grading papers, and participating in voluntary professional development required more hours daily and throughout the weekends than before the pandemic. Zoom has been a large part of the majority of faculty members' existence since March 2020. Nietzel (2021) reported how the pandemic has affected faculty and future career decisions. The findings showed (*1) the majority of faculty were experiencing elevated levels of frustration, anxiety, and stress, (2) more than two-thirds of survey respondents were struggling with increased workloads and imbalance of work-life boundaries—essentially female faculty members and (3) more than half of all faculty considered retiring or changing careers and leaving higher education, with tenured faculty members even more likely to retire than others.* During March 2020 through June 2020, the rapid change to a remote instructional model with limited opportunity to prepare and train resulted in personal feelings of exhaustion and ineffectiveness.

Lessons Learned To Create Better Course Delivery

Peter DeWitt (2020) observed that teachers transitioned classes to remote environments and moved into pandemic or crisis teaching and learning. In a span of a few weeks in March 2020, with the quick spread of the pandemic, campuses shifted from face-to-face classes to "remote instruction" (O'Keefe et al., 2020). Nearly every educator in the higher education community simultaneously converted courses either online or using a video conferencing platform for the remainder of spring 2020 and beyond. It is not entirely simple to pivot from in-person to remote learning in 14 days or less. In speaking with colleagues, most faculty did not feel equipped to deliver remote teaching in such a short period. Therefore, many faculty members moved into pandemic or crisis teaching, now referred to as remote teaching to provide continuity for completing the 2020 spring semester.

The availability of internet usage increases and technology evolves; there has been an upsurge in distance education and virtual colleges before the pandemic (Croxton, 2014; Fonolahi et al., 2014; Seiver & Troja, 2014). This technological evolution has allowed colleges to reach students that they would not otherwise have reached (Garman & Good, 2012). Over the past year, with the need to provide online and virtual courses, professors and instructors in higher education have sought professional development to deliver asynchronous and synchronous courses effectively. The new reality provided the opportunity to reimagine how to address the needs of the graduate and doctoral students. Professors, instructors, and adjuncts had to become more proficient in asynchronous and synchronous course delivery. In order to do so, it was essential for instructors moving into remote teaching to engage in a variety of professional development offerings focused on course design, instructional strategies, course components, course materials, student engagement, and assessments for asynchronous and synchronous instruction.

Fortunately, many organizations, institutions, and companies provided free webinars for PK-12 and higher education during the pandemic and into the 2021 academic year on video conference training, collaboration tools, and student feedback (Chappie, 2020; Horry Georgetown Technical College, n.d.; Sheninger, 2020; Pacansky-

Brock, n.d.). The University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) offered professional development on "Humanizing Online Learning and Teaching," a three-week online course for faculty. "*The course goals focused on strategies for continuing to design and facilitate humanized and connected online learning communitie*s" (Office of Digital Learning, 2021). UNO's Humanizing Online Learning and Teaching course, adapted from Dr. Michelle Pacansky-Brock's research on humanizing online courses, provided insight into creating effective online, hybrid, remote, and possibly in-person courses. According to Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, and Vincent-Layton (2020), many well-known theoretical frameworks, including validation theory, culturally responsive teaching, social presence, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), have shaped the concept of humanizing online and synchronous courses.

The strategies taught in the UNO "Humanizing Online Learning and Teaching" online learning course included the cognitive presence and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) models that appeared to be adaptable to any course delivery to improve class instruction and engagement. Garrison (2017) defines cognitive presence as "a process of inquiry that includes thinking, listening and expressing thoughts in the process of critical discourse." To further explain, cognitive presence allows the instructor and students to explore concepts of the course through collaborative discussion. I believe this strategy was most helpful in building a sense of community and engagement in the remote 2021spring and summer graduate and doctoral courses that I taught.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides options for students to interact with the content, practice, and demonstrate their understanding of the concepts. According to Tobin & Behling (2018), options support engaging students from diverse backgrounds and experiences in the classrooms. During the 2021 spring and summer courses, it was essential as an instructor to understand and provide alternatives and a variety of assignments, collaborative activities, and discussion boards to create avenues for successful learning for all students.

As I began planning for the 2021 spring semester, an important question was how students perceived remote and online classes. According to Brooks (2021), a fall 2020 study conducted by Educause reported that 9,499 students from 58 institutions participated in the research to share their perspectives regarding online classes. The quantitative findings specified that students with full-time jobs and/or families tended to prefer asynchronous online classes. The report further discussed the students' most positive experiences regarding the number of opportunities for student-instructor interaction, rather than the type of learning environment itself. More than the use of the technology, issues of importance to the students were time spent in class, the amount of feedback received, and direct interaction. With knowledge of these findings, as an instructor teaching 2021 spring and summer semester graduate courses, it was critical for me to provide opportunities for students to check in with other students and with the instructor and to provide interactive and collaborative experiences, whether those interactions happened in real-time or asynchronously through discussion boards. Similar to traditional classes, it was essential for me to create a presence that was integral to student engagement. From the onset, I intentionally made myself available by hosting regular virtual student hours (instead of office hours) to reinforce a sense of caring to strengthen the student and faculty connection, even more so than I did pre-pandemic.

One final observation based on my experience is that the graduate students in the 2021 spring and summer Instructional Leadership courses appeared to become more engaged when various collaboration activities were incorporated during the class session, using tools such as Padlet, Zoom chat, Zoom breakout rooms, Google Docs, and JamBoard. One graduate student stated that "*The variety of activities, interactions with other students and the professor made for a rich online content and very much feeling like you're in a community."* As a graduate instructor, my learning has been abundant during the past 16 months. I think instructors, professors, and adjunct professors in U.S. institutions may have acquired additional technology skills compared to pre-pandemic times, and it seems unlikely that they will unlearn these skills in the next few months. As an Educational Leadership faculty member, I have fundamentally changed through this experience and will continue to explore new ways of teaching and engaging students in relevant learning experiences post-pandemic.

New Possibilities For Virtual Teaching and Learning Moving Into The Post COVID Era

It is hard to imagine that anyone will return to what "normal" seemed before March 2020. The real question is, why would anyone want to return to pre-March 2020 teaching and learning? The future graduate and doctoral courses may provide more flexibility with deadlines and grading, various times to connect with students through virtual meetings and office hours, and a wide range of perspectives from guest speakers from near and far (McMurtrie, 2021). These flexibilities were essential for my graduate and doctoral students as they dealt with hectic

and changing work schedules and balancing home obligations during the pandemic, such as virtual schooling of their children.

Initially, it seemed impossible to engage students during a 2.5-hour synchronous graduate Educational Leadership course through Zoom. Teaching to the Zoom screen is not similar to teaching in person. It is not a quick fix to dump in-person content into the virtual environment, which may inherently lead to failure. As an instructor, I was well aware that no one strategy works for all students. Therefore, in this environment, it was essential for me to provide flexibility and variety to students and, at the same time, to determine what is the best model for teaching and learning remotely. Recording my classes is one best practice that I will continue to implement, whether in person, remote or hybrid. My graduate and doctoral students frequently requested the recordings to rewatch the lectures to improve their understanding of concepts presented or listen again to the expert speakers from different geographical locations. For instance, one of the expert speakers was a distinguished professor from a university in Africa and one of the course textbook's authors. It was refreshing to have an international perspective in the Zoom class, which did not often happen in the in-person classes or cost to bring the presence to the discussion.

The graduate and doctoral classrooms will continue to use technology in diverse ways during online, synchronous, and in-person classes. The pandemic has caused technology to be a significant part of faculty teaching for the 2020-2021 academic year. McMurtrie (2021) stated that professors are mastering tools to better connect with their students in various settings. Over the past year, professors have learned how to incorporate JamBoard, Google Docs, Padlet, Nearpod, and many other collaborative tools into their lessons, group work, and informal assessments. UNO's EDL faculty and students are exploring many choices for teaching and learning in graduate and doctoral courses post-pandemic.

The UNO's Humanizing Online Teaching and Learning course offered many strategies for faculty to employ for online and synchronous courses. Using micro-lectures is a strategy worth exploring. A micro lecture is a short, recorded audio or video presentation on a single, tightly defined topic (Scagnoli, 2012). Micro lectures create accessibility and flexibility for students before the actual class. For example, using short videos can be utilized to introduce or explain complex concepts or assignments. Short videos viewed before the class opens up more time for discussion and interactions during the actual class period.

Zoom can be a platform for every student's voice to be heard by using the chat. Graduate students are encouraged to respond to questions and each to other through the chat. Merely from my observations and experiences, face-to-face discussions can be dominated by a few students; however, the chat can promote more balanced discussions. The chat risk-free environment *"offered reflections in the online space through chat and discussion board,"* Bektashi (2018) quotes William Kerrigan, a history professor at Muskingum University.

A study supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) (Ogilvie et al., 2020) described the experiences and perspectives of approximately 3,500 graduate students at 12 U.S. public research universities who responded to the survey during June—July 2020. The graduate students' responses revealed significant evidence of hardship, including worries about food and housing, delays in research, and disruptions to career plans. Notably, graduate student respondents generally reported feeling more support from their advisors or professors and peers during the pandemic. Furthermore, graduate students reported feeling more support for their physical and mental health than their economic well-being.

One graduate student in the UNO EDL Instructional Leadership course (Spring, 2021) stated*, "I love being in person and seeing everyone. I am willing to give up in person for the convenience of being home and not fighting for parking. A side benefit, I can still see and talk to everyone."* As a 2021 spring semester Instructional Leadership course instructor, I observed that students would remain on the Zoom platform following the designated class time to engage in an informal conversation with the instructor and one another.

Teaching and Learning Post-Pandemic

From my personal experiences, the following strategies may help support the new reality for faculty to reimagine teaching and learning for the 2021-2022 academic year.

1. **Faculty Playbook.** Create a faculty playbook with the resources most needed. The playbook is a compilation of best practices to guide course design and delivery. Content for the faculty playbook may include instructional strategies, assessments, and collaboration tools. Review the website Humanizing Online Learning at https://brocansky.com/humanizing-online-learnng for resources to incorporate into courses.

2. **Student-Centered Lessons**. Strive to develop student-centered lessons to assist in connecting the students with the content and professor during the class. Use the live chat feature on Zoom to gather students' questions in real-time and simultaneous responses through collaboration tools. It is crucial for students to feel connected during remote classes. As one student stated in a graduate-level education course (Fall 2020), "*Very evident that she prepares in a way that helps us be successful--really cares about our development—has a respect for our needs as aspiring educational leaders. She makes herself very available and accessible. Challenging but supportive--all the things we'd hope to be in a good leader!"*

3. **Establish A Student Cohort Structure**. Before the semester begins, create a sense of community by placing students in cohorts to get to know one another and stay connected through the semester. As a part of my class structure, students started with the cohort meetings to work on a group assignment or discuss the pre-reading to share their perspectives on the topic. In addition, motivate students by providing differentiated assignments in which students can exercise their creative problem-solving skills by selecting a topic or format, using technology to complete tasks. Temporary groups can be created around the student-selected assignments to share ideas and individual perspectives on the tasks.

4. **Utilize Micro-lectures.** Zoom fatigue can take a toll on students and faculty. To buttress actual class time and reduce screen time, record short video lessons to introduce and explain a complex topic or assignment to be reviewed before class. Using micro-lectures may expand the instructor's role to that of a community manager who facilitates activities and group work to keep students active, motivated, and engaged during class time (Chen, 2020).

5. **Professional Development.** It will take time to gain expertise in various instructional models for graduate and doctoral course delivery. The current experiences will help to adapt the content, rather than replicate it. In order to provide similar meaningful experiences as in traditional instructional models, I believe that repurposing existing course materials and methods will take training and new learnings as universities move into the post-pandemic phase. Technology will be the norm, so every instructor will need to be competent in technology. It will be necessary to seek professional development opportunities to enhance the graduate and doctoral classroom experiences. Many professional development opportunities are available at little or no cost for anyone to become digital savvy, i.e., Education Week, Chronicle of Higher Education, and edWeb: A professional online community for educators.

Conclusion

Extraordinary innovation is taking place every day on campuses across the globe. Zoom and synchronous instruction have surged as popular models for real-time class delivery during the pandemic. Lessons learned range from reinventing the role of the instructor, to redesigning courses, to gaining new technology skills. After an unprecedented year, in-person classes have returned to many campuses for the Fall 2021 semester with much anticipation. However, there is still a need to examine practices to determine how best to meet the needs of graduate and doctoral students as everyone navigates the return to the next normal for higher education.

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