# "Put Your Own Life Jacket on First": Experiences Adjusting to Teaching Professional Social Work Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** We present the experiences of three master's-level professors from eclectic professional backgrounds as we navigated the cancellation of in-person learning due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Our narratives highlight the intense emotional and professional toll of negotiating the unchartered territory of moving to an online format while balancing student needs and upholding academic rigor. Focusing on creating safe spaces for students to be heard, adjusting course format and content for a virtual platform, and embracing the experience of moving from expert to novice enabled us to thrive at a time of crisis. Questioning our teaching methods and re-evaluating materials for critical content has influenced our teaching in unexpected ways and given us a roadmap for challenges that may lie ahead.

*Keywords*: professional education, COVID-19, online learning, lived experience

## Introduction

*"[A] crisis is an aberration from the person's typical pattern of functioning, and he or she cannot manage the event through the usual coping methods."* (Walsh, 2013, p. 306)

Online and remote-based education is a widely studied and published area in secondary education. But what about rapidly switching to online learning during a crisis? When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic with the presence of a novel coronavirus, nearly all colleges and universities were impacted (Bryce et al., 2020; Delgado et al., 2020). As public health directives resulted in colleges and universities shutting down campus, educators responded reactively by rapidly transitioning to online teaching to mitigate COVID-19 spread. Challenges emerged for both faculty and students in adaptability, communication, and with the format itself (Popa et al., 2020). Subsequently, the unexpected immersion into the online environment necessitated a change in the student-teacher dynamic and use of professional self.

## Personal Narratives

We share our experiences of abruptly moving from a face-to-face teaching model to an online format to highlight our personal reactions, professional dilemmas, and lessons learned. We hope to impart support for others in similar circumstances, validate the complex personal and professional context of online teaching, and share how we were stretched and challenged by this experience. We conclude with key takeaways as the three of us move forward with other professional educators and prepare for the unknown landscape that lies ahead.

## Beginning My "New Normal" Teaching Experience

Who would have known as we entered the new year of 2020 that internet access, familiarity of online learning, and challenges related to internet quality or user expertise would become key components to delivering course instruction? I (Margaret) can still remember the moment we received word at my institution that students were to be sent home to isolate, and we would begin, literally the next day, delivering our lectures via a virtual format. Platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Facetime quickly became commonplace languages.

I found myself relocating from a seated pedagogy to a newly created online space. This new overnight experience of switching teaching methods within the midst of a rapidly spreading pandemic brought both a feeling of sameness and a feeling of a need to quickly transition into innovative pedagogies to prevent knowledge gaps in my MSW courses. Within the context of a pandemic, can I effectively relay social work curriculum completely online? And, more importantly, how can I successfully support my MSW students during a time of students' loss of employment, lack of home technology to participate in online distance learning, and students' real fears of facing a pandemic that takes the lives of family loved ones while simultaneously struggling with my own pandemic fears? This is my journey through (re)discovery and (re)conceptualization of what it means to teach master's level social work during a forced vacuum where spatial geography literally was a determining factor to delivery of curriculum.

As an assistant professor in my second year of teaching, this perception of our forced online teaching method filled me with real fear of my ability to be effective. I have taught for years as an adjunct professor with a diverse background of teaching in seated, online, and hybrid modalities, but at that moment, all confidence in my ability came into question. Immediately my known culture of teaching shifted to me generating alternative methods for learning experiences as well as new ways to measure student progress during an emergent situation.

### Teaching in a Vacuum

My new normal in my mind consisted of an overwhelming combination of a new format of online classes taking place in a home setting which served multiple purposes beyond just class. I was immediately plunged into a world that required me to (re)think how I would be teaching when everything I was used to and prepared for was no longer an option. This, for me, was isolating, and I felt like I was working not only within a pedagogical vacuum, disconnected from other instructors, but also within students' realities of being isolated and in their own vacuums.

At the start of the March lockdown, students reported feelings of panic, fear, worry, lack of security due to loss of jobs, and uncertainty of what the future held for them. Classes frequently began with student discussions of acute interconnected worries that included how to stay safe,

fear of working in a global pandemic, fear of not being able to work and its resulting loss of income, and making sure there was food for their families. Students reflected on vulnerable personal situations such as being far from home and alone, their worries of family members infected or at risk of infection and their inability to be with them, the loss of family and friends to COVID-19, and their inability to support and care for their immediate families. At times, listening to students' concerns and their exposed vulnerabilities left me with feelings of inadequacy in this new teaching environment. How could I carry on teaching while dealing with all the added anxiety (including my own)?

**Life Not as Usual**

As I adjusted to my new teaching normal, recognition of a need for reorganization became evident. From my perspective, I had to create an atmosphere and environment conducive to learning. But what I also realized was that my students had to re-organize their living environment from domestic and family to accommodate working from home, the demands of childcare, with the addition of homeschooling and continued domestic responsibilities. What became evident for me was that this forced reorganization due to the pandemic was not singly a matter of creating an academic space, but also an intrusion of me into my students' private space. I was invading the family environment and voyeuristically experiencing my students in their personal living space while simultaneously expecting them to be academically available and ready to learn.

Physicality and spatial considerations soon were evident to me as I found myself witnessing a world of complexities that included a new online presence, a never-experienced-before private versus public space that at times could be awkward and uncomfortable (Morgan, 2018). Looking back, the discomfort I felt came from my expectations and demands in an atmosphere of a spatial and pedagogical blurred line. The need for students to be constantly available between work and school, I feel, created an atmosphere of constant disruption, constant toggling between private life versus public life, and the expectation of being available digitally for longer periods of time. It felt as if the blurring of spatial boundaries and newly defined workspaces, coupled with increased use of virtual platforms such as Zoom, created the feeling of disconnect between not only us as instructors with each other, but also among student-instructor interactions and student-student interactions. It became even more important to prevent disconnection of student cohorts in what seemed like a very impersonal interaction.

The pandemic brought an overnight change where recognition of spatial geography challenges, inequity in resource distribution, and my own pedagogical discomfort became my necessary tools for moving forward. Although the academic challenges were immense and stress inducing, I also found that the pandemic illuminated an incredible adaptability within myself. I rallied behind our students and created a new sense of safety and connection. The recognition of more traditional methods of delivery were not going to work, and I needed to find more inventive ways to deliver effective master's-level social work curriculum. My teaching pedagogy has

shifted to one of embracing technology, checking in with students at each interaction, and recognizing and acting on inequitable challenges. Most importantly, with the recognition that as an instructor I am invading the sanctity of someone's private and personal space, it is up to me to create an environment that is respectful and conducive to learning.

### Less "Me," More "Us": Moving Forward After the COVID-19 Shutdown

When COVID hit, I (Annette) had been teaching full time for three semesters—a late career switch for me after 20 years of direct social work practice. The experience of launching myself into unfamiliar territory, taking risks, learning new skills, and consciously developing a sense of myself in a new professional role as professor, were still very fresh in my mind and part of my reality. I had a profound sense of responsibility to provide the best possible experience to my students who had not signed up for virtual learning. Using information on how to use technology for teaching online (National Institute for Digital Learning, 2021), tips for adjusting content and expectations to meet the change in format (Garrison et al., 2000), and discussion of inequities resulting from virtual versus face-to-face learning, I forged ahead.

### Readjusting to a New Landscape

With the whir of COVID-19-related restrictions, lockdowns, recommendations for not spreading the virus, and worries about getting sick constantly humming in the background of my life, I was feeling very unfocused and more emotionally vulnerable than usual. I have always been able to rely on my sense of discipline and focus to get my work done. Now, I was redesigning my courses on the fly but found myself so easily distracted by my new home office. I kept jumping up from my chair to do chores, grab another snack, look at mail, etc. All the while, I was getting a lot of worried emails from students who wanted to drop out. Their lives were turned upside down. How could I expect my students to focus with their new reality if I, too, was struggling?

With six weeks of the semester left, I had to figure out how to teach using a new format with my students who were all learning in a new, stressful, and unexpected context. Before I tackled the course content, it was clear to me that we all needed to slow things down. Not only did I need time to adjust to the change, but I knew that the students were also trying to figure out how to continue with their studies. I was a bit conflicted about this as I knew that we still had material to cover, but I also knew that if I couldn't engage everyone to the best of their ability, the rest of the term would not go smoothly. This was a new situation, and I was not the expert on how best to make this switch. It was time to be humble.

### Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Looking for a way to organize my expectations of engaging my students in a genuine way online, I happened upon a helpful article that contained an "adjusted syllabus" written by a professor who presented five principles that were a good fit for finding a path forward with my

students (Supiano, 2020, para. 6). The idea of embracing the competing challenges I was facing with this change, focusing on the important aspect of my role as teacher by acknowledging each student's unique personal experience while maintaining intellectual focus resonated with me. Asking the students to embrace these principles with me allowed for space to respect each person's individual context, make mistakes, and adjust expectations as needed.

The first step I took was to make a video message for students acknowledging how disruptive this change was for them and affirming the difficulty many were having rearranging their lives in a short time. I stated that we would get through this semester together. As I recorded this part of my message, I got emotional, my voice was shaky, and I felt tears forming in my eyes. I didn't stop recording. It was important for them to see and hear me responding to our situation genuinely, tears and all. I forged ahead, not sure what to expect.

**Learning Humility and the Central Role of Students in Learning**

The first few times on Zoom I made a lot of mistakes. There was much to manage as I welcomed students into the virtual classroom, paid attention to letting students in through the waiting room, saw questions and comments in the chat feature, and tried to hold a conversation with students as more joined in. Once class started, I struggled with talking and setting up the breakout rooms; frequently, I just stopped and told them what I was doing. Still, I sometimes forgot to set up the time limit and their discussions were interrupted before they were done. I would just apologize and reset the rooms. Making mistakes became part of my teaching experience, so I tried to model with grace, acknowledging errors and moving on; in the end, this was their learning experience, and my ego had no place here.

Along with mistakes I learned to be very flexible. For each session, I prepared materials, activities, and time for discussion. Looking out at all the faces on my computer screen, it was hard to tell how present students were. I was used to an occasional student falling asleep in class or being engrossed in something other than class materials. Now it was more difficult to figure out if I had their attention. I engaged in a lot of "in the moment" assessment of what content to cover. The online classroom highlighted for me that this is their space as much as mine. I may be the professor, but without the students being present and engaged, learning will not take place.

As I planned my summer and fall classes, the lessons from March gave me a whole new perspective on who I am as a professor, what my role is, and where the students fit in. I am much more sensitive to creating modalities of instruction that include all types of learners; I'm more vocal in giving permission to make mistakes and allowing for more time to complete a task. Sometimes, less is more. I have found myself telling the students something I hadn't before: "You hired me to teach you, so use me—ask questions, contact me outside of class, tell me if something isn't clear." The students have found a more central place in my classroom and my goal is to keep them there.

## This Wasn't on My Schedule

I (Leanne) am a planner. I pride myself on being organized and am buoyed by being able to anticipate and head-off challenges in both my personal and professional lives—I love it when a plan comes together. March 2020 challenged the planner in me, and I have yet to fully recover. I recall rocking my then 11-month-old son to sleep in the dark of his bedroom, trying to calculate what "working from home" was going to look like. How would I manage my many work roles having the kids home? At the time, I was working full-time as a research associate, teaching adjunct, and just starting a consultant role for an organization serving kids with special needs. My plate was FULL, and I was already juggling how to keep my time, energy, and brain-space separated for each of these roles. As my son's humidifier whirred and gurgled, I was admittedly self-focused: Would my research supervisor be understanding that I wouldn't be in the office? How will I manage multitasking things I never intended to multitask? Should I un-enroll my kids from daycare to save the money, or wait it out—it's only going to be a couple of weeks of lockdown, right? I'd better get out the highlighters tomorrow to color-code my schedule, or maybe make a full-on spreadsheet.

## Life Jackets

I often tell my students to remember to "put their own life jacket on first." Educating professional social workers invariably includes discussions of how to recognize and address issues like burnout, exhaustion, countertransference, etc. We preach this as peers and educators: In order to help others, you should take care of yourself too—it's part of the curriculum. Even considering the unprecedented and widespread challenges of COVID-19, I found myself and my colleagues clinging to these same concepts of self-care: proper sleep, eating right, exercising, getting a massage, taking time off, and practicing mindfulness and self-awareness (Rokach & Boulazreg, 2020). These are the life jackets we are used to. However, some of my own efforts to engage in self-care—and encouraging students to maintain their efforts—rang hollow. This was different. We would need more than life jackets—we needed a rescue boat.

I came across the same sentiment toward the end of 2020: That how we educate students, and the tools we have used for so long, fall short when the trauma is collective and you cannot separate your personal and professional selves due to the pervasiveness of the challenges (Cohen-Serrins, 2021). Cohen-Serrins (2021) suggests that the pandemic has laid bare some of the inadequacies of our usual ways of coping with stressors and burnout. The argument is that there is a need for macro-level support in these cases, and that the individual approach is inadequate in a collective crisis. From my own experience this past year, I agree—I was not going to be able to solve things by myself for me or my students. Much of it was out of our control.

**Expert to Novice**

In education we are working to help novice professionals develop into masters. The implication being that the educator has been through this process and can provide guidance and support to others on their professional journey. I'm learning that we can always become novices again. For me, being thrust into an online teaching environment was just the beginning. In addition to learning new ways of presenting material and assessing student progress, I was also newly understanding myself and how I prefer to integrate (or separate) my personal and professional selves.

I learned that I would survive without being in complete control! It's not fun, but I can do it. I learned that getting good sleep is more helpful to my mental health than staying up late at night to finish work. I also learned that it's okay to communicate with students some of your challenges—they are experiencing them too. Pretending it's not happening to you during a collective crisis can contribute to feelings of isolation for your students. Students may have seen me handing off my youngest as class started on Zoom or taking a minute to give my older son some direction to prevent a meltdown. I found that acknowledging my challenges was helpful to students who were doing the same: rocking a child to sleep during lecture or taking a five-minute break to get a child off the bus or feed a hungry pup. Personal could not be separated from public, and it was unreasonable to expect it from students or ourselves.

Students shared more about themselves, too. I learned about several students struggling with ill family members, and fear of worsening illness impacting their ability to be fully present for class. Others experienced isolation due to quarantine or not being able to travel home to see family. Still others let me know that their internships and jobs were especially stressful because of any combination of COVID-19-related issues. Sharing our collective challenges actually helped us connect in ways that might not have happened otherwise.

In terms of rescue boats, there were some. First, the flexibility that was afforded to myself and my students from the two programs I teach was critical. The goal was to learn and not to make life harder than it needed to be. Students were given extra time for assignments, some assignments were changed to provide flexibility in how they were completed, and sometimes class time was used just to connect with how everyone was doing if that's what the class needed at the time. I have to say, my full-time position did not afford the same level of flexibility, and this caused me a level of stress that I feel was unnecessary and counterproductive. That contrast allowed me to see the value and humanity in providing that understanding to students, as well as myself.

**Moving Forward**

Foremost, we should acknowledge that even with the challenges we faced as educators, we are experiencing this from a position of privilege. As three White, PhD prepared professionals, our

experiences do not capture the range of challenges that other colleagues and our students have faced. In our teaching roles, we have been able to continue to work, even if remotely, while many of our students or their family members have lost jobs. Only one of us had to navigate childcare issues. We did not have difficulty accessing technology to make this switch which included computers, web cameras, reliable internet, adequate home office space, and the knowledge and experience to put them to use relatively effectively.

What remains apparent is that our educational structure continues to be embedded in middle- to upper-class infrastructure. Disparities exacerbated by the crisis need to remain top-of-mind when faced with challenges in the future. This is critical to ensure future efforts focus on supporting students disproportionately facing barriers to their education, and to prevent disparate program drop-out. Our recommendations below should be viewed from this perspective of promoting equity, even in the absence of crisis.

**Flexibility**

When things are going well, or as expected, we tend to be rigid with the "little stuff." The future of the pandemic is unclear and dependent on many factors: continued exponential infection, vaccination rates and effectiveness, the yet to-be-determined impact of new variants of the virus, economic recovery efforts, and more. Flexibility across the educational experience is necessary for both practical and humane reasons. Students will continue to experience barriers to their success: internet connectivity, stress about caring for their families, serious illness, financial hardship, student motivation levels, fear, and the very real impact of loneliness for those distanced from others by quarantine and public health guidelines. Flexibility has become an inextricable component of teaching.

Flexibility should begin with eliciting continuous student feedback and assessing course manageability, student motivation and engagement, and material synthesis. Next, we must be willing to adjust content delivery method, class structure, course schedule, and assignment guidelines or format as needed. For us, many of these areas had to be altered to re-engage students after an unexpected shift to online learning. The goal of meeting educational objectives should remain front and center, not sticking to things "as they have always been done." Flexibility does not mean sacrificing high quality work expectations; it means being open to the reality that to meet professional standards, an honest conversation about what people need to be successful is also a professional skill to model for students.

**Proactiveness**

Proactive planning to meet student needs simultaneously addresses issues of equity and disparity and makes us better prepared for future events that may impact our typical modes of instruction. To fulfill this aim, we can design more robust courses that include multiple ways of delivering material, promoting student interaction and engagement, and assessing knowledge and skills—a

pool of resources to draw from based on individual student or class needs. In order to stay relevant, the time for shying away from online course management and instruction is over. More importantly, students learn in many ways, which demands us to be fluent in both in-person and online instruction.

In addition, we can proactively create a space for students to communicate their needs openly, with the intention of forging collaborative solutions to meet these needs. Our students are already adults; we should be taking more steps to allow them to determine how best to manage their multiple personal and professional roles. We found even our young students were carrying deep burdens related to parents' loss of jobs, illness, childcare, and balancing school. Proactive approaches should include regular check-ins, discussions of optimizing student availability, and revamping coursework to ensure we are prioritizing demonstration of proficiency rather than creating busy work. These efforts necessarily involve a reexamination of our pedagogical perspective, geared toward shifting more control to the student as expert in themselves, and acknowledging that the blurred lines between personal and professional lives illuminated by the pandemic were, in fact, always there.

**Re-Mastering**

Finally, our experiences point to the need to accept that, as professionals and educators, we remain novices in the lives of our students and—when faced with a collective crisis—ourselves. What we know about coping, stress, burnout, and boundaries (all basic knowledge in our profession), can fail us in times of unprecedented stress. Moving forward, there are institution- and macro-level changes that could allow adaptation to the changing needs of our students, as well as address existing needs highlighted by this crisis. Flexibility in course delivery, course management, and assessment are just the start of us re-mastering our skills as professional social work educators. Critical changes that have occurred as a result of campus shutdowns should not be lost after things return to "normal." In order to provide the rigorous professional education that our students deserve, we must remain tapped into our own willingness to re-learn skills and actively seek alternative solutions.

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