And Then There Was COVID…

Natalie Ames and Jodi K. Hall

Abstract: Most colleges and universities across the United States careened into online learning with little time to prepare in March of 2020. Neither faculty nor students had any idea how this new world of online teaching and learning would unfold, or how long it would last. With the benefit of over a year's hindsight, many of us can probably identify things that have played out in ways that were both better and worse than expected. This narrative focuses on a few lessons two social work faculty members learned from an experience we neither requested nor welcomed. We can only speak for ourselves; we know our experiences are not universal. We present them here in an effort to make sense of what we have experienced and to reflect on what we can learn from these experiences moving forward.

Keywords: online, in-person, virtual, teaching, reflective teaching

Introduction

In March of 2020, universities essentially closed down in-person learning and sent students home as faculty scrambled to shift their courses to synchronous or asynchronous online formats. We are social work educators but, regardless of discipline, the transition was difficult for most faculty and students (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2020; Dempsey, et al., 2021; Gares et al., 2020). Most of us quickly adjusted to a virtual platform with little experience followed by mishaps, adventures, and lessons in virtual teaching and learning. This is a reflective approach to understanding what it means to make mandatory shifts in teaching and how the process can prepare us for the future.

We are two associate professors at a large public university who both came to social work education as seasoned social work professionals. Nothing in our careers could have prepared us for the events that transpired in the spring of 2020. It certainly never occurred to us that, well over a year after life as we knew it came to a screeching halt, we would still be struggling to make sense of the many changes in our personal and professional lives. We could not have imagined the emotional toll on students and the level of patience and understanding that would be required.

We were on our own for the last half of the spring 2020 semester, frantically shifting our courses to an online format, struggling with new technology, and learning on the fly. To its credit, our university offered many virtual workshops over the summer of 2020 to help us prepare to teach online in the fall. However, learning online to teach online was a challenge in itself. There was a disconnect between workshop presenters, all of whom appeared to have years of online teaching experience, and ourselves as an audience of novices. They were enthusiastic; we were exhausted by what we came to recognize as Zoom fatigue. As we attended one workshop after another, we often floundered in an overload of information. After the first 10 or 15 minutes of basics, we would find ourselves trying to make sense of rapid demonstrations of all the technological bells

and whistles we could use to "enhance" our teaching and our students' learning. The presenters made it sound so easy but, by the end of most workshops, we found ourselves overwhelmed and fearful we would have little of value to offer our students.

Our Stories

Natalie

I used to live my work life in a three-dimensional world filled with colleagues and students. Now I live my life, all day every day, in the flat world of the computer screen. COVID-19 abruptly pulled the rug out from under me. I must first acknowledge how fortunate I was to have that rug in the first place as well as a solid floor beneath it. Woven into the rug was the predictability of my work as a college professor who could look forward to meeting a new group of students in each of my classrooms at the beginning of each semester and watching them learn and grow over the next four months. Also woven into the rug were the pleasures of daily conversations and collaborations with colleagues and the interactions with students who dropped in to talk, all of which I took for granted. The floor beneath the rug? I was still employed, albeit remotely, and had a dedicated space in my home from which to work. To stretch this metaphor a bit further, I felt wobbly and off-balance without my rug, to put it mildly.

I have struggled with the technology I need to teach, although at the same time, I take a certain amount of pride in the fact that I have mastered enough of the technology to do the teaching. I teach a foundation practice class that focuses heavily on client interviewing skills that students practice in the classroom. Like many social work educators, I believed teaching these skills in-person was the only way to teach them well (Archer-Kuhn, 2020). While I still believe in-person is superior, I have evolved enough to see that I can teach, and students can learn, interpersonal skills in a virtual environment. Nonetheless, I still regret the interpersonal connections my students and I missed.

The students were as gobsmacked as we were by the sudden turn of events in March of 2020. Initially, we all assumed—or at least hoped—we would be back in our classrooms before the end of the semester. Instead, I finished the semester asynchronously, my only contact with students through frequent emails and a series of Zoomed face-to-face conversations. My reason for choosing to teach asynchronously was the aforementioned discomfort with technology. I simply did not believe I could master the basics sufficiently to teach synchronously. I longed to see my students' faces and, in retrospect, I wish I had opted to teach at least part of my class synchronously. However, in March of 2020, I did not "have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide such services in a competent manner" as is required of our social work ethics (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017, 1.04d).

From the outset of our transfer to strictly online courses, we were forbidden to require students to keep their cameras on. Some students were so consistently off-camera that I would not recognize them if I were to see them in person. We had class discussions about the importance of

being visible for the practice exercises. Privately, I was annoyed and frustrated when half of my Zoom class consisted of blank squares with only a name and/or a still photo emblazoned on the screen. However, in one-on-one conversations with some of those off-camera students, they revealed they were attempting to learn in crowded, sometimes noisy, spaces they were sharing with siblings and parents and roommates. Yes, we were all experiencing a shared trauma, but the effects on faculty and students were not the same (Dempsey et al., 2021). Still, mine was a social work practice class. How do students learn to observe and respond to non-verbal communication? How do they practice expressing empathy, with invisible partners? I still cannot answer that question.

Our university offered faculty a choice in the fall of 2020 between teaching online and teaching face-to-face. As COVID-19 cases surged in our state, my choice was to stay as safe as possible by teaching my practice courses synchronously online. After a summer of sometimes frustrating, sometimes enlightening trainings, I balanced trepidation with a willingness to take a chance on my newly acquired technological knowledge. I have still only mastered the basics. We Zoom into our virtual classrooms. When a student emails frantically that they cannot Zoom in (and the glitches are varied and mysterious), I have learned to ask the students in my virtual classroom to suggest solutions, something they nearly always do.

I have mastered assigning students into breakout rooms for small group discussions and exercises into which I randomly intrude. In fact, one of my discomforts stems from the intrusiveness of dropping in virtually on these small group activities. At least in a face-to-face classroom, they can see me coming before I sit down with them to listen or coach or provide feedback. I worry that I am trying too hard to make the online class resemble a face-to-face class. Nonetheless, students' end-of-semester course evaluations were surprisingly positive.

As for that choice between teaching online and in person we were offered in the fall, my decision to teach online proved to be an inadvertently wise one. Less than two weeks into the fall semester, the university once again required classes to go online.

In the spring, I was particularly apprehensive about the final class assignment, a video interview that requires students to apply their skills, evaluate their performance, and meet with the instructor to discuss the assignment as a learning experience. In the world we used to inhabit, we would match students from different sections of the course to take turns conducting their interviews with each other. Students uniformly dread the assignment in advance and, in retrospect, call it their best learning experience. For some reason, it never occurred to me, in the spring or the fall, that we could still match the students to conduct their interviews. Instead, I allowed students to interview, either in person or virtually, a family member, friend, acquaintance, or co-worker. Looking back, I see that decision as one measure of the depth of my discombobulation. There are obvious drawbacks to interviewing a friend, relative, or co-worker about personal aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, students were able to display, apply, identify, and reflect on the skills they had learned.

Lessons Learned

Students have been good about emailing when they cannot connect, and attendance has been neither better nor worse than before COVID. Four of 20 students in one of my classes came down with COVID during the fall semester. To my surprise, these students continued to attend class despite not feeling well, which I believe is a testament to their desire to learn and stay connected even if only remotely.

Most of the BSW students in each graduating class bond as a group. Some make lifelong friends among their classmates. These relationships bloom when students see each other in person. With no opportunities for informal classroom conversations before and after class, students have little opportunity to develop such relationships. The best solution I have come up with is to arrive in our virtual classroom 15 minutes before class starts and remain connected until everyone leaves. A few students regularly arrive early to chat with me and each other and, some days, one or two students will stay after class to ask questions or share their worries.

Because of my concerns about students' physical and mental health, I check in with any student who misses class. An "I missed you, are you okay?" email after class usually yields a quick response that includes some insight into the struggles students are having but hesitate to bring up.

What would I do the same when we resume teaching face-to-face? I think I inadvertently slipped into a flipped classroom by asking students to complete the written parts of classroom exercises before class. This has meant more time in class for the small and large group discussions of those exercises. Asking students to respond to open-ended questions about the readings before class means—I think—that more of them are doing the reading, even if superficially. These are definitely things I will continue to do whenever we are once again teaching face to face.

As the pandemic grinds on, I have found it helpful to remind myself—and my students—frequently of something I saw or heard early on: *Don't let "perfect" be the enemy of "good," and don't let "good" be the enemy of "good enough."* I don't believe in perfection to begin with, and there is certainly no place for it in this strange new world.

Jodi

When the university announced in March 2020 that it was extending spring break by a week to allow faculty to prepare to move all classes online, it never occurred to me that nearly a year later we would be in a worse predicament, and that everything I thought I knew about teaching would change.

In the fall of 2020, the university allowed us to choose between teaching online and face-to-face. I chose face-to-face although I was apprehensive about my choice right from the start. Before classes began, I ventured over to campus to view my classroom. It was filled with Plexiglas,

high-tech video equipment, and signs that read: *Do not sit here*. Not exactly a welcoming environment. The instructions for teaching face-to-face also required us to give students the option to view the class from home. This meant every word we said, and every move we made, would be recorded and sent to all students registered for the course. My unease grew as I considered the current culture of overly analyzed speech and how quickly misunderstood words could go viral, with every word and move recorded. I considered that students might be reluctant to talk if they knew they were being recorded. After all, in social work education, classroom interaction often includes discussion of sensitive topics where we pledge not to share sensitive or personal conversations outside of the classroom. Would we ask students to provide informed consent to being recorded? What about their right to privacy and confidentiality (NASW, 2017)?

While I was contemplating my choice, I talked with my primary physician about my concerns. She chuckled when I told her I would be teaching face-to-face and stated confidently, "Within two weeks they will suspend in-person classes because there will be too many COVID-19 infections."

On the first day of class, I stood awkwardly behind a moveable Plexiglas screen, wearing a mask, hooked up to a microphone, and watched a countdown alerting me that recording would begin in 30 seconds. This was the only warning my students and I had to remember that everything you say may be used against you. Nothing about the experience felt comfortable or safe. Students looked nervous. I could not see how this arrangement, in a closed-off, likely minimally ventilated classroom, would keep any of us safe. Students began to talk about how uncomfortable they felt, even though they had chosen to sign up for an in-person class. I, too, regretted my decision. As it turned out, my physician had predicted, almost to the day, when the university would suspend in-person classes, send students home, close the dorms, and move all classes online. Once again I had a week to prepare to teach via Zoom.

It took time to fully recognize the gravity of the situation we faced. This was not making a one-time change to a class because of inclement weather or an unexpected illness. This was new, scary, confusing, and hard. Initially, I learned to project patience and calm to my students even when I felt little of either. After all, we were all living through the same traumatic situation, and I could tell my approach brought them comfort. Everything else I thought I knew about teaching was less helpful; it did not consider the need to master new technology immediately, or the fact that we were amid a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. The first weeks of Zoom teaching were filled with delayed and frozen screens and the realization that I would need much more powerful Wi-Fi in my home office. I had to remember to smile a lot in order to keep my students at ease. Many more lessons were soon to follow.

These are challenges that are likely typical of all educators who were thrust into virtual classrooms. I was fortunate in that I had used Zoom often in another setting, so I was familiar with the basics. The basics, however, do not prepare one for the difficulty of adjusting a social work course to this platform. Nor did the basics prepare me to manage my home technology and the technology of my students. "Try turning off your camera," I would say in what I know now

to be an unnecessarily loud voice, as cameras froze in the middle of students' attempts to verbally and visibly participate.

Typical issues for me included people wandering in the background, students driving in cars, children entering the room and showing fascination at seeing themselves on the screen, the dizzying shadows produced by virtual backgrounds, students forgetting to mute while engaging conversation with someone in their house, and so on. Social work education depends on the professor's ability to facilitate engaging discussions. In the beginning, it was unsettling to see students staring blankly at me with a mix of fear and confusion. At first, virtual breakout rooms produced anxiety amongst the students. Admittedly, it is a bit strange at first to be sent floating off to a virtual room. Joining students in the breakout rooms felt intrusive, and my sudden appearance caused the students to lose their train of thought and become hesitant. And then there were the times I ended the whole class session while simply trying to leave a breakout room. I finally decided not to join the breakout rooms and instead engage them in discussion when they floated back to the main room. Sometimes that took a while because, like me, students clicked in the wrong place and exited the virtual classroom instead returning to the main room.

Lessons Learned

I originally thought I would need to replace the group presentation assignment because I was not sure how it would work on Zoom. My students had a lot of questions, and I searched the internet for tips and suggestions. I became determined to make group presentations work, even if not perfectly. My introductory social work class consisted of many non-social work majors, and I wondered how I would manage discussions when students confidently introduced COVID-19 conspiracy theories. As everything became political in the midst of a contentious election, I relied heavily on evidence-informed information to gently ease conversations back to the topic of the day and towards truth. For the most part, students appeared well-informed about COVID-19 and safety. The group presentations themselves were remarkable and perhaps even better than in-person presentations.

The way that students responded to the group presentation assignment was a huge surprise. Several students said it was the most important experience they could have had. This was striking because undergraduate students often complain quite a bit about group projects. Yet, students now said it gave them a sense of normalcy and made them feel like part of a community. They felt less alone because the group members became their friends, and they felt very connected. Not a single group reported any problems or that anyone was not participating. In fact, they often reported, with tear-filled eyes, how much they needed the interaction that being in a group provided. That was unexpected and beautiful. This love of group work is likely pandemic-specific and may not translate back to in-person classes. However, I will share with those future students that working in a group can be an excellent way to connect and build positive relationships.

I decided to present my lectures facing my students instead of sharing the PowerPoint slides on the screen. Each student had electronic copies of the slides and could follow along if they chose to do so. In hindsight, I think students were struggling between looking at me, looking at their slides, and taking notes. This was less of an issue for the in-person version of the class since looking down at notes was more natural and normal. This experience will remind me to give students permission to look away from the screen to take notes in a Zoom class. Something about the Zoom experience, perhaps the influence of professors or the nature of the platform, leads students to think they cannot look away. I reviewed literature about Zoom fatigue and became more comfortable encouraging students to occasionally turn off their cameras. I found that students were less likely to keep cameras off the whole time once they were given the freedom to decide when to have cameras on. I wanted them to know that I saw cameras occasionally off as a sign of self-care.

Absences were another source of uncertainty since the university was asking us to offer students maximum flexibility. Was the student whose camera was off as present as the student whose camera was on? Was the student who conveyed nonverbal engagement through nodding and other facial expressions more present that those who did not? How should I respond to the student whose eyes appeared closed for an extended period? Was this a little break to reduce eye strain or a true nap? Overall, what I found was that students were even more engaged virtually than they were in class. I encouraged commenting in the chat box and considered it equal to verbal participation. I paused to occasionally respond to chat box comments to affirm the value of all participation. I have observed many excellent chat box comments that students might never have raised had I not treated verbal and written communication equally. More introverted students may open up more as they get comfortable with communicating non-verbally. I am not sure what an equivalent method would be for in-person classes, but I am now more aware of the importance of finding alternative ways to hear students' voices in a social work class.

Conclusion: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Sometimes, over the past year, we have found ourselves making up rules and solutions on the fly, always remaining mindful of trauma that students might be experiencing. We reminded students, perhaps too often, that it was okay to feel uncertain. As time went on, just as with in-person classes, we all got more comfortable with each other and adjusted to new ways of teaching and learning. We Zoomed together with faculty colleagues to exchange ideas, solutions, and just to commiserate. At the end of a year of virtual living, we do mourn what we have lost. As Rob Jenkins (2021) stated in a thoughtful column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "We're less collegial, less unified, less connected. Less human" (para. 13).

What do we look forward to? We long to be in the same room with our students. Yes, we use breakout rooms to do small group activities, but in the classroom we can observe all the groups at once. We can see their body language. We can sit down with them to listen and answer questions or clear up confusion. We also long to be in the same room with our colleagues and to have the spontaneous conversations that arise when we run into each other in the hall. We want

to be in our offices to experience the joy of having students drop by to talk about class or ideas or career plans or life in general. We want to look out our office windows and see the familiar campus scenes we didn't truly appreciate until they were no longer part of our daily lives. We learned new ways of teaching, new ways to include students, new approaches to assignments, and we learned that resilience is not just a word we use in social work, but a word packed with meaning and hope when the unexpected crashes into our world.

References

Archer-Kuhn, B., Ayala, J., Hewson, J., & Letkemann, L. (2020). Canadian reflections on the Covid-19 pandemic in social work education: From tsunami to innovation. *Social Work Education, 39*(8), 1010–1018. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2020.1826922

Dempsey, A., Lanzieri, N., Luce, V., de Leon, C., Malhotra, J., & Heckman, A. (2021). Faculty respond to COVID-19: Reflections-on-action in field education. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00787-y

Gares, S., Kariuki, J., & Rempel, B. (2020). Community matters: Student-instructor relationships foster student motivation and engagement in an emergency remote teaching environment. *Journal of Chemical Education, 97*(9), 3332–3335. https://dx.doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00635

Jenkins, R. (2021, March 3). 6 things we can't afford to lose when campus life resumes. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. https://www.chronicle.com/article/6-things-we-cant-afford-to-lose-when-campus-life-resumes

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics*. https://www.socialworkers.org/about/ethics/code-of-ethics

About the Authors: Natalie Ames is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC (919-515-0454, nrames@ncsu.edu); Jodi K. Hall is Associate Professor, School of Social Work, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC (919-513-2784, jkhall@ncsu.edu).