# *REFLECTIONS*

## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING



Special Issue on the Impact of COVID-19 on Preparing Future
Helping Professionals and on Practice with Individuals, Families,
Groups and Communities: Social Work Education

Guest Editors: Katherine Selber and Lynn Levy

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# Reflections from the Guest Editorial Team:
# The Impact of COVID-19 on Preparing Future Helping
# Professionals and on Practice with
# Individuals, Families, Groups, and Communities

Katherine Selber and Lynn Levy

**Abstract:** In this guest editorial, we introduce the first of two Special Issues on the impact of COVID-19. Our goal for this issue is to tell the stories of lived experiences, interpersonal interactions, witnessed events, and the complexities educators encountered by the logistics of either reopening campuses or learning online while keeping students and faculty safe. Authors featured in this issue reveal the challenges of changing teaching modalities, focus on the realities of moving to online platforms, and offer strategies for self-care and connection in the face of isolation.

*Keywords***:** pandemic, online teaching, isolation, connection, education

Welcome to the first of two Special Issues of *Reflections* focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on professional education and practice. Over the past two years we have experienced an unprecedented amount of turmoil, chaos, and challenges due to the effects of a world-wide pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply changed our lives and those of our families, our communities, students, clients, and our institutions. As we all experienced personal and professional challenges, we began to reflect on how these might also be affecting our educational institutions, practice agencies, and professional education in particular. Educators and practitioners have struggled to continue to support social work and other helping profession students through these times of financial hardships, loss, grief, and demands for learning how to navigate isolation, new and changing health care protocols, and public health disruptions without a map of how to do so. As we acknowledge the ever-present parallel process, this Special Issue was conceived during this maelstrom in an effort to contextualize our new reality and adapt to a new normal.

Our goal for this Special Issue was to tell the stories of lived experiences, interpersonal interactions, witnessed events, and the complexities we encountered by the logistics of either reopening campuses or learning online while keeping students and faculty safe. Many of us found ourselves embracing new teaching technologies and methodologies for online education and interacting via media platforms while assisting students with virtual practice protocols. The impact of the pandemic on educators, practitioners and their clients, and the institutional cultures in which they work was felt by everyone as we navigated this new and challenging landscape. Along the way we all were required to change—in some positive ways and in some ways unexpected and perhaps unwelcomed. We remained committed to the Special Issue as our colleagues responded with manuscripts that both inspired and instructed us—all helpful in illuminating our way forward. Each of the articles in this issue is deeply personal and self-reflective and each sheds light on a time in our lives that demands chronicling and a shared commitment to try to articulate what may have left us speechless at times.

Some day we may look back on this and determine that in the process of losing our old communities and ways of teaching we actually found better, richer, and more connected ways of doing our work and leading our lives. This is the first of two Special Issues that we believe captures much of our fears, challenges, and losses as well as the camaraderie we found along the way.

This issue focuses on the challenges encountered by educators as they pushed forward on multiple platforms and, in many cases, with little to go on except the overwhelming mission of being there for students and guiding them through this new world. The landscape was changing as quickly as the weather, and we groped to hang on and find meaning and purpose in our work. Many of these articles provide valuable insight and discovery and offer us a pathway to new landscapes.

Three articles by Grape, Lane and Walters; Ames and Hall; and Leisey explore the challenges of shifting teaching modalities mid-semester and moving students and faculty to online platforms. The struggles of students and educators are notable as everyone searched for stability and some indication that life could be normal again. Livingston, Bost, Kerr, and Wilson tell the story of how an assistant professor and three MSW students adapted to online instruction amid the emotional experiences of balancing personal and professional lives. Clary and Hernandez explore the importance of self-care and strategies to promote this in the classroom for educators as well as our students while Shah's poem draws attention to the human as well as professional challenges. Radis and Deedat discuss not only the trauma imposed on us by the pandemic, but the very real trauma of racial injustices that were interwoven into the experiences of the pandemic by BIPOC populations, impacting us in the classroom and in all fields of social work practice. Authors Thurber, Suiter, and Halverson also examine theoretical lenses used to guide reflections through the pandemic and that acted as beacons along the path. Hastings and Hawkins reveal the challenges in making our way back to community as faculty members and colleagues confronted the isolation imposed by the pandemic and the sense of community that they missed.

We would like to thank all of our authors for their openness and willingness to tell their stories and reflect on their fears and feelings in real time. We also thank our guide Dr. F. Ellen Netting for demonstrating care and support to us as we pushed forward learning and experiencing much of what our authors in their manuscripts wrote about. In addition, we would be remiss if we did not mention the many reviewers who gave their time unstintingly to our special issue of manuscripts. We are deeply grateful to the following reviewers for all you have done to ensure this first of two special issues is representative of the fine work of our authors and the journal: David Conley, Jeffrey Scott Yarvis, Jill Becker, Joan Beder, Jordan Wilfong, Kelly Clary, Lara Vanderhoof, Laurie Blackman, Matt Price, Monit Cheung, and Nanette Fleischer.

Finally, we are grateful for the friendship and camaraderie that has grown between us as we collaborated on this special issue. We would never have been brought together otherwise and it has enriched both our lives.

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We appreciate your commitment to this journal and its authors!!

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# Dear Social Work Educators, Teach and Model Self-Care

Kelly Lynn Clary and Laura M. Hernandez

**Abstract:** A social work educator, I joined with a student to examine the social work profession's challenges with burnout and self-care, to explore my lived experiences clinically practicing at an inpatient psychiatric hospital and emergency department during the beginning of the Global Pandemic, and to aggregate critical reflections on how to improve teaching strategies for social work students. This reflection focuses on two themes implemented during a fall 2020 social work direct practice course for undergraduates: 1) teaching and 2) modeling self-care strategies and work-life integration. There is no better time than now to promote wellness in the classroom so students have the skills and confidence to continue applying these strategies throughout their careers. If social work instructors are not emphasizing the importance of self-care, who is going to? Social work educators can—and *should*—utilize their roles to teach and model positive self-care behaviors and work-life integration approaches, exemplifying the imperative nature of upholding one's wellness.

*Keywords*: social work education, self-care, workforce, case study, social work profession

Now more than ever, amidst a global pandemic and a polarized election, situated within structural inequalities and inequities across the world, social work educators need to teach and model self-care strategies for their students. We acknowledge burnout syndrome has long existed among helping professions, specifically the social work profession (Kim et al., 2011; Lloyd et al., 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; McFadden et al., 2015; Vîrgã et al., 2020; Wagaman et al., 2015; Williams, 2015). Burnout is a response to chronic work stress (Leiter et al., 2014) caused by various factors including but not limited to overworking, time management struggles, lack of job satisfaction and resources (Oliveira & Rossi, 2020), stressors, large caseloads, involvement in emotionally charged situations, lack of support (Vîrgã et al., 2020), and exhaustion (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1981); social workers often encounter a mixture of these components. Burnout symptoms include discomfort, fatigue, frustration, cynicism, inefficiency, and other negative feelings such as anxiety and depression (Oliveira & Rossi, 2020). More recently, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, mental health professionals are suffering from stress, sleep disturbances, depression, and anxiety at elevated rates and are showing a profound interest in learning about wellness resources (Ornell et al., 2020). Research shows unmanaged stress can lead to negative health outcomes and wellbeing (Kim et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2017), including mental health conditions (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2010).

Social workers in helping roles must feel emotionally supported to best assist their clients. One study found healthcare professionals neglected their patients' psychological issues or avoided connecting due to their own high emotions, which went unaddressed and unresolved (Barello & Graffigna, 2020), exemplifying the correlation between one's wellness level and their engagement with clients. When social workers experience burnout symptoms, it interferes with the level of care they can provide to their clients, specifically around rapport and empathy (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). We know social workers who experience fewer burnout symptoms provide better care and are more productive in their workplace (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). I

believe there is no better time than now to thoroughly address and integrate self-care awareness and strategies into social work curricula. A recent study found 80 percent of social work students reported the COVID-19 global pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2020), exemplifying the imperative nature of promoting and encouraging self-care strategies during and after a global health crisis. Social work academics must adequately prepare social work students to take care of themselves so they can adequately perform in their classes to make it to the professional social work field.

## The Social Work Profession

Today, there are more than 700,000 social workers in the United States, and this number is projected to grow 13 percent from 2019 to 2029, which is much faster than other occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). We know burnout among social workers is high (Kimes, 2016); and, more recently, there has been a steady increase in workloads, stress-related health issues, and turnover in human service organizations (Dollard et al., 2003; Geisler et al., 2019; Mor Barak et al., 2001), specifically among social workers (Astvik & Melin, 2012; Geisler et al., 2019; Giffords, 2009; Griffiths et al., 2017; Tham & Meagher, 2008). Self-care is a well-known, empirically supported approach (Colman et al., 2016; Santana & Fouad, 2017) to decrease negative outcomes and encourage one to thrive in various aspects of their life (Wise et al., 2012). One large review found fostering awareness, balance, flexibility, physical health, social support, and spirituality could prevent burnout related symptoms while also promoting wellness in various areas of life (Posluns & Gall, 2019). A paucity of research exists on the implementation of self-care practices among social workers (Miller et al., 2019). However, a national study with almost 3,000 social workers found this group engaged in only *moderate* self-care practices, insinuating a need for a systemic response to addressing and encouraging self-care strategies (Miller et al., 2019). Teaching and encouraging self-care strategies may alleviate burnout symptoms, promote better wellbeing, and foster improved care and treatment for the clients social workers serve. Those in social work educator roles must utilize their platforms to teach future social workers to appropriately take care of themselves, not only so they can better serve their clients, but so they can continue helping others.

## Why Now?

I (Kelly) started my first semester as an assistant professor in a school of social work at a large public university during fall 2020, transitioning into not only a new role, but also a new state, new community/home, and multiple new contexts. These numerous changes were challenging but, because of my commitment to self-care and work-life integration, I believe I have been able to persevere. Having worked in numerous high security and stressful social work settings (i.e., juvenile detention center, inpatient psychiatric hospital, and medical emergency department), I have learned that self-care strategies are imperative to prospering as a professional, while also helping to meet and exceed my clients' needs.

My most recent social work clinical experiences took place during the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic (i.e., January through August 2020). During this time, I served as an intake assessment and mobile crisis specialist at an inpatient psychiatric hospital and medical

emergency department, some weeks clocking in more than 60 hours. Those days were spent with constant walk-in patients, referrals, phones constantly ringing, elevated crises, and high emotions among staff. These circumstances were particularly difficult during the COVID-19 global pandemic because there were fewer beds to house clients/patients, social distancing guidelines had to be upheld, and personal protective equipment (PPE) had to be worn to protect ourselves and our clients. This required extra time for important protocols and attention to details. Further, there were more emails and meetings to learn about the agency's updated procedures; altered daily activities; extra cleaning of supplies/materials (i.e., pens, clipboards, chairs, tables); and increased stress about following the appropriate protocols to ensure health and safety among our clients, staff, and for ourselves. Some of the strong emotions were caused by uneasiness with working directly with clients who were in contact with someone who had COVID-19, strict guidelines for maintaining social distancing that created a barrier when attempting to build rapport with new clients, and the anxiety of possibly bringing the disease home to our loved ones.

During these months, I witnessed many colleagues reach—and some surpass—their breaking points, needing to take multiple days off to take care of themselves and reset. I saw others no longer wanting to serve in their roles because of extra responsibilities and expectations from administration, and some losing joy, interest, and passion for the work they were trained to do and clients they were helping. Unfortunately, this led to many of those social workers feeling overburdened, exhausted, and frustrated. Some colleagues decided to quit their positions, further adding to the increased workloads and high emotions of employees, exemplifying inflated turnover rates in the social service profession (Dollard et al., 2003; Geisler et al., 2019; Mor Barak et al., 2001). For most of those who stayed, it seemed their self-care and work-life integration plans were solidified. They maintained boundaries at work; responded to their mental, emotional, and physical health needs; and came to work refreshed and ready to take on their responsibilities each day. I quickly learned to set boundaries by choosing to not work on weekends, setting aside an hour each day to exercise, and only responding to work emails while on the clock. I focused on getting enough sleep each night, preparing a nutritious lunch, and maintaining positive relationships with my family and friends.

Because of my experiences being situated in a year unlike any other, I decided I must do my best to prepare my future social work students for these types of environments, unexpected circumstances, public health crises—and even a global pandemic. I do not want my students to struggle like some of my colleagues did. I want to do my due diligence as a social work educator to best prepare my students to take care of themselves throughout their educational journeys and into the professional field. Because of this, as I started creating my syllabus for fall 2020, I critically thought about my practice experiences and knew I had to weave work-life integration and self-care into the entire semester—knowing the numerous stressors (e.g., global pandemic, election year, hybrid teaching model) would persist. I taught and modeled various self-care strategies in my social work direct practice class for undergraduates. Because of the positive feedback from my students, I will continue promoting self-care and work-life integration in my future social work courses.

## Work-Life Integration and Self-Care

The phrase "work-life integration" seems to slowly be replacing "work-life balance," something I fully support. I believe this new phrase insinuating integration of the two aspects is practical and achievable. Work-life balance assumes there is equilibrium between work and personal endeavors; however, this is rarely, if ever attainable. Work-life balance also separates work from personal endeavors, suggesting you must not overlap these two areas in life—another thing I believe is impossible. I encourage my students to view the framework of work-life integration rather than work-life balance when discussing their self-care strategies. Work-life integration encompasses a mindset of taking care of yourself to fulfill your duties in *all* aspects of life.

What is self-care? I believe it is more than a go-to buzzword when someone mentions they are doing less than okay. If you search this phrase on the Internet, you will find millions of videos, books, strategies, articles, and "how-to's" on self-care. It is great there are so many resources, but it can be overwhelming to some. While the Internet can offer great suggestions and serve as a starting point, I propose self-care strategies must be more personalized than a simple Internet search.

To me, self-care is engaging in activities that "fill up my cup." The umbrella term of self-care includes a variety of activities that fulfill me mentally, physically, spiritually, emotionally, and socially. These activities range in type and duration depending on how I am feeling and what my body needs. Self-care, for me, includes things such as consuming enough water throughout the day, putting aside time each day to engage in exercise, taking a lunch break away from my desk, walking in nature, breathing in fresh air, and turning off my phone when I am watching a movie/show. I constantly share with my students that we cannot fill another's cup (i.e., a client's) if we have an empty cup ourselves. This means we, social workers, must feel energized, fulfilled, and nourished before we can assist our clients.

Social workers in training (i.e., social work students) should have the resources and support throughout their social work education to create, modify, and implement their work-life integration plans incorporating self-care strategies. Students should observe their instructors, mentors, and supervisors modeling work-life integration practices. Teaching self-care from the beginning to the end of one's educational journey can encourage the use of positive strategies throughout one's professional career. Speaking about and modeling practices can inspire students to take care of themselves, so they can provide the best assistance to the clients, families, and communities they will serve.

## Teach Self-Care

I believe self-care should be a topic embedded across the social work curricula. I believe assigning one course, or class period, to address this topic is doing a disservice to our social work students. If students view this topic as unworthy to be discussed throughout their social work education, the message they are taking away is they do not *need* to prioritize this approach in their career. Social work educators should work towards integrating self-care throughout all courses. I share two overarching themes I applied in my fall 2020 social work course (see Table

1).

| Teach: | 1. Devote class time to teaching & dispersing self-care | |
|---|---|---|
| Teach:<br>Disperse Throughout | | a. Create a discussion forum with self-care ideas |
| | | b. Check-in with individual students via assignments |
| | | c. Facilitate class check-ins on moods & stressors |
| | | d. Identify professional development topics |
| | 2. Emphasize self-awareness and self-reflection practices | |
| Model: | 1. Set your tone & boundaries from the beginning | |
| | 2. Discuss work-life integration & self-care strategies | |
| | 3. Advocate for the Social Work Reinvestment Act | |

Table 1. *Themes and examples to teach and model self-care.*

**Devote Time to Teaching and Dispersing Self-Care**

Teaching self-care can be convoluted. However, I believe there are various opportunities to educate social work students, no matter the course content we teach. In my class, I set aside time at the beginning of the semester for students to create a self-care plan. This worksheet was a tangible and modifiable document that allowed students to recognize their stressors, as well as activities they could engage with to maintain wellness. I emphasized self-care is not one thing, like a bubble bath, that will magically make you feel brand new or make your stress levels disappear. Rather, it is a conglomeration of diverse things you do related to wellbeing (i.e., physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, social). Throughout the semester, I asked students to refer to their plans and consider if they needed to modify or change any of their strategies. This opportunity emphasized the importance of self-care, but also illuminated how strategies can—and do—change over time.

I have devoted time to dispersing and encouraging the conversation on self-care in innovative ways; this included creating a discussion forum where students could post pictures and descriptions of them engaging in self-care activities. I asked students to share a picture of themselves or provide a summary of self-care things they did during the week leading up to class. Students enjoyed learning about—and even adopting—their peers' strategies. Stemming from this activity, students asked me if I could create a central location where they could share activities in our geographic area, such as places to eat, hike, and socialize. I created a Google Jam Board where students could post pictures, ideas, and places to go to, which is readily accessible and modifiable, even after the semester ends.

I also utilized individual check-in assignments throughout the semester. During week four and week thirteen, I asked students to create and upload an audio or video recording sharing how they were doing, challenges they saw arising, and things I, their instructor, could do to support them. I then responded back via a video. Students explained they never had an assignment like this and appreciated the opportunity to personally check in with their professor. I saw this as an "informal" way to communicate with my students since we do not have a multitude of in-person face-to-face opportunities due to the hybrid teaching model.

I also periodically asked students to share their moods or feelings during check-ins at the start and end of class. I believe this acknowledges how students' moods fluctuate, and it reminds me to be understanding, patient, and flexible depending on my students' standing. One of these check-ins was an icebreaker asking students to share an emoji which best represented their current mood at the beginning of class. I also randomly grouped students in pairs to create a Google Jam Board with images illustrating things they did for their wellness the past week and things they would do the upcoming week. Students were then asked to share their plans with the class. I saw this as an opportunity to practice oral communication with some level of self-care accountability from their peers.

Lastly, I incorporated various professional development topics into each class, spending 10 to 15 minutes on each topic. Subjects included "Learn What You Love to Do and Not Love to Do," "Considering Long Term Social Work Goals," "Time Management Skills," and "Conflict." These presentations captured important areas often unaddressed in formal social work curricula. I believe bringing awareness to these topics allowed for students to recognize professional aspects of work, which would not only better prepare them for the workforce, but also alleviate transitional stressors and encourage a holistic work-life integration approach. My students shared they have greatly appreciated this learning opportunity and that they now feel more confident in how they professionally present themselves.

**Emphasize Self-Awareness and Critical Reflection**

To prepare culturally competent social workers, social work educators must teach self-awareness and self-reflection strategies (Colvin-Burque et al., 2007; Messinger, 2004; Negi et al., 2010). CSWE's (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) require social workers

to "apply self-awareness and self-regulation to manage the influence of personal biases and values in working with diverse clients and constituencies" (p. 7) when engaging diversity and difference in practice (Competency 2). While demonstrating ethical and professional behavior (Competency 1), social workers must "use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations" (CSWE, 2015, p. 7). Self-awareness, self-regulation, and reflections are core strategies and behaviors social work students are taught so they can serve their clients while upholding professional social work values.

I propose these strategies are necessary not only when serving in the social work field, but also for one's own self-care and work-life integration plan. Students must be self-aware of their feelings, mental health state, and personal issues they need to address to uphold wellness. I believe social work educators can easily address this in their curriculums since it is a skill already conveyed. Self-awareness strategies are necessary to create and alter self-care plans and work-life integration boundaries. Social work educators can integrate these teachings into courses by having conversations with students about how and why burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and high turnover rates persist. Educators should emphasize the importance of self-monitoring and critical reflection around work environments/contexts, colleagues, and supervision. Social workers should have the knowledge and skills to critically assess their situations so they can make informed decisions regarding their self-care and work-life experiences.

## Model Self-Care

It is no surprise that, as social work educators, our students often look up to us for knowledge, wisdom, and mentorship. Because of this, social work instructors must be mindful of the way we behave and implement policies in our classrooms. Social work educators should model positive work-life integration and self-care strategies throughout our professional roles. We offer three ways I modeled self-care, which other professionals might consider adapting (see Table 1).

### Set Your Tone and Boundaries from the Beginning

Setting your tone from the beginning of the semester is important. Students should understand and respect your expectations, but should also recognize you are flexible, adaptable, and understanding—characteristics social workers must often illustrate in their own careers. I do this on the first day of class by telling my students I recognize and understand my class is not the only thing they have going on in their lives, similar to my life (e.g., grants, publications, meetings, committees, family, friends, dogs, social events—you get it). Related to this, I allow my students to request written assignment extensions; however, they must do so at least 24 hours in advance. I view this as a balance; my students benefit, but on the other hand I expect them to respect the time and effort put into creating and grading assignments. I also view this as a conglomeration of numerous professional skills at play. First, students must be self-aware of their current standing and stressors; they then must think critically about their time management and, if they determine they do not have the capacity to complete an assignment before its due

date, they then must create a professional email requesting extra time to complete their assignment. All of these tasks must be completed in a timely, professional matter. My students seemed to really appreciate this flexibility. One student responded to an approved extension with, "I'm literally in tears with relief! Thank you so much!" (personal communication, October 2020) and later shared:

> Thanks to you, these are things I did because I didn't have to beat myself up mentally, trying to finish my assignment within 24 hours: 1. Showered (seriously, I did that as soon as I got your email telling me I had extra time to finish my work without penalty.) 2. Prepared six nutritious meals to warm up and feed myself this week. 3. Caught up on sleep Saturday morning. 4. Divided my work time so I could go on a hike Sunday afternoon before it got nasty outside today. 5. Enjoyed reading up on topics related to the first case study so I would have a better understanding of the subject. (personal communication, November 2020)

Reminders like this assure me the procedures and flexibility in place are helping my students academically, professionally, and mentally, exemplifying my commitment to *students' self-care*. My hope is students will be more cognizant of my classroom procedures and further incorporate or replicate them into their professional social work careers.

On a related note, I have a statement regarding religious and cultural observances that coincide with the class schedule. I encourage students to honor their cultural and religious holidays because I acknowledge not all holidays are recognized as federal or University days off. I ask students to inform me of their holiday observance ahead of time so I can excuse their absence. I view this as being mindful not only of my students' diverse identities, but also encouraging participation in personal endeavors—illustrating work-life integration.

When I think of professional boundaries, I reflect on work-life integration. I strive towards making sure I am meeting my job expectations, but also enjoying my non-job tasks. For me, this includes a variety of things. First, I put aside one day a week where I will not respond to any emails, grade any papers, work on manuscripts, presentations—*anything*. This allows me to reset my mind and promote motivation for the following days. Second, I share with my students I will respond to emails within 24 hours during the weekdays, and 48 hours on the weekends. This decreases my stress and anxiety around providing immediate responses to students. It also illustrates my commitment to work-life integration by creating realistic boundaries. Third, I am learning how and when to say "no" to tasks and requests that do not align with my academic mission and vision. Learning to say "no" is challenging but helps me stay on track to meet my review criteria. I have done this by not saying "yes" on the spot, mapping out my short and long-term goals to assess if requests align with my mission and focus areas, and asking for support from experienced mentors. Doing these things helps me stay on track to accomplish my goals, while not feeling exhausted or overwhelmed. When I am enthusiastic, have energy, and am motivated, I believe my students feed off the energy and view me in a more positive light. This allows me to provide the best instruction and feedback to my students.

**Discuss Your Self-Care Strategies**

It is okay to talk about things we do as academics that do not involve academics. We must normalize/universalize talking about non-work-related tasks with our colleagues and students. Having informal conversations about activities and events we engaged in (e.g., movies, exercising, shopping, traveling) outside of job responsibilities is important. These types of conversations should be natural. For example, I bring up fun extracurricular activities I did over the weekend to promote conversations around *not* working seven days a week. Educators can encourage students to attend school sporting events to socialize and have fun; this not only suggests the students support their university/college, but also exemplifies engagement in non-academic work. Another thing I do is share when my self-care strategies change. For example, I was walking my dogs every morning for 30 minutes, but I found this to be burdensome. I found quick ten-minute walks scattered throughout the day help me clear my mind, refocus, and get some fresh air. Sharing this example with my students models how self-care strategies can (and will) change depending on one's needs and schedule.

With this in mind, I recommend social work students and educators find a self-care plan that works for them. I encourage the social work community to engage in a deep self-reflection and become aware of their own needs—physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and social. This is important because we must be attuned to our own needs and desires to "keep our cup full." We should not try to copy others, but rather recognize that self-care strategies that work for one of our colleagues or peers may not work for us. Further, we must be patient with ourselves, and acknowledge that sometimes we need to adjust accordingly depending on our feelings, environments, contests, and current events. In this narrative, I offered what I have done for myself and my students in hopes to encourage this discussion to continue. However, I would be doing a disservice to the social work community by recommending certain activities that fulfill self-care. It is up to each individual to determine the activities which "fill their cup" and nourish them physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and socially.

**Advocate for Policy Change (Reinvestment Act)**

Social workers engage in social and political change that create positive effects on individuals, communities, and systems. Social workers are expected to "advocate for human rights at the individual and systems level" and "apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" (CSWE, 2015, p. 8), as stated in EPAS Competencies 3 and 5 (CSWE, 2015). Social work educators can encourage their colleagues and students to advocate for their profession, specifically by supporting the enactment of the Reinvestment Act. First, we must teach our students about this act; then, we must model self-advocacy practices, which we can encourage fellow social workers as well as students to join us in.

It is well established that social workers have high rates of injuries and illnesses, excessive caseloads, lack of support and resources, significant educational debt, and insufficient salaries

(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Due to these challenges, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) set in motion the Social Work Reinvestment Act to ensure quality improvement within the profession. This act works towards addressing professional concerns by enhancing recruitment, retention, and research by reinvesting in the profession of social work (NASW, 2019). The Social Work Reinvestment Act directs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish a Social Work Commission to provide independent counsel to Congress (Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, 2019). The Social Work Commission would then study and address social workers' issues such as fair market compensation, high education debt, workforce trends, safety, workplace concerns, and state level licensure policies (Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, 2019). In addition, it would provide resources to translating social work research to practice, as well as work towards creating a reciprocity agreement for providing services across state lines (Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, 2019). Social work educators can maintain the core competencies of social work by shedding light on this act and encouraging advocacy practices around issues that matter to the profession.

**Conclusion**

Now, more than ever, social workers must feel prepared to appropriately tackle a variety of stressors while still upholding their job responsibilities and non-job engagements. Unfortunately, some research suggests those in health professional roles, specifically social workers, are not taking care of themselves as best as they could and *should* be. This not only has lingering negative repercussions on their health and mental health standing/state but is known to negatively interfere with the helping relationship with clients (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015). Future research should seek to understand which self-care strategies have been valuable for social workers at different stages in their career (i.e., educational courses, field internship, and pre/post licensure), their focus area (e.g., substance use, mental health, schools, criminal justice, etc.), and agency setting (e.g., research funded, non-profit, private sector, etc.). Additional research can uncover how social work instructors/educators are teaching social work students and interns about burnout and self-care. This evidence can assist with a more thorough integration of teaching self-care strategies within the social work curriculum, professional development, and continuing education trainings.

As social work educators, we propose utilizing our platforms to encourage and motivate students to integrate tailored self-care strategies at the beginning through the end of their social work curricula. We can, and *should*, utilize our roles to teach and model positive self-care behaviors and work-life integration approaches, exemplifying the imperative nature of upholding one's wellness. Social work students often look up to their professors; let's be sure our behaviors, policies, and content model what we preach throughout our profession: *Self-care is a vital core competency*.

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# Teaching and Learning in the Midst of COVID-19:
# The Impact of Locus of Control on Emotional and Professional Survival during a Global Pandemic

Val Livingston, Angela Bost, Briana Kerr, and Kayla Wilson

**Abstract:** This treatise represents the lived experiences of an assistant professor of social work/MSW admissions director and three first year MSW students as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic and participated in an online instructional platform. The experiences and adaptive skills of the MSW students are presented in their own voice. The disappointments, distractions, disruptions in family relationships, and absence of actual human interaction with peers and professors are relayed from each contributor's perspective. Adaptive techniques employed by each student and the assistant professor are discussed from a locus of control perspective. Recommendations for future research are offered as they relate to the emotional and physical concerns experienced by faculty and students during the pandemic.

*Keywords*: locus of control, resilience, social work

As an assistant professor and MSW admissions director for The Ethelyn R. Strong School of Social Work, I (Val) am often presented with the challenge of responding to student crises, institutional changes, and periodic weather-related disasters. In January 2020, I became aware of a new virus in China, but I was indifferent since it did not appear to be affecting the U.S. Within a few weeks, COVID-19 emerged as a worldwide phenomenon and severely impacted my duties as the admissions director by prohibiting in-person attendance at graduate school fairs, open houses, career fairs, and MSW information sessions. I did not have teaching responsibilities during spring 2020 and therefore experienced less of the anxiety related to the fast-paced move to an online class format. Like other faculty, I was required to participate in a two-week online instructor training designed to assist faculty in acquiring and mastering the skills needed to provide a remote synchronous class format. By the end of March, I had completed my certified online instructor training and was now able to conduct classes, meetings, and interviews virtually. My biggest fear had centered around the idea that I would not have sufficient mastery of the various online platforms and tools such as Zoom, Blackboard, Socrative, or Kahoot. I tested a number of tools in advance and felt reasonably comfortable that I would be able to conduct my fall class with few problems. My anxiety level diminished considerably. Despite this confidence, I remained hopeful that my fall class would be in-person.

During spring 2020, I screened 84 applications for admission to the program, interviewed 60 applicants, and admitted 50 for summer and fall 2020. We encountered a number of technology issues conducting applicant interviews virtually as applicants experienced problems with bandwidth and Wi-Fi. One applicant interviewed in their car using a cell phone. Like other institutions of higher education, we soon discovered that some of our students and applicants were "socially disadvantaged" because they lacked access to technology and the internet (Crawford et al., 2020, p. 2). Despite my online instructor training and numerous platform

options, I was not a fan of this technology because I now had a good idea of the types of technology glitches that might occur.

As the months passed, accepted students began to email me regarding the platform for summer and fall classes. We were uncertain of the instructional platform until a few weeks before classes were scheduled to start, partially due to the university's need to abide by guidance from the governor. Once it was announced that most classes would be online, several students withdrew from the program. Two weeks before fall classes were scheduled to start, the university announced that all classes would be virtual for the first two weeks and then transition to the traditional in-person format. I was thrilled to hear that I might be able to conduct my foundation level course, Social Work Profession, in-person. The technology issues I had experienced with the virtual applicant interviews and virtual meetings had dampened my enthusiasm for virtual classroom instruction.

The online class format required a considerable amount of preparation in advance of class starts: Welcome messages had to be developed, course syllabi needed to be adjusted to reflect online instruction, and contact methods and virtual office hours had to be identified since faculty would not have traditional office hours. Assignments, quizzes, and PowerPoints had to be uploaded. Inserting videos for classroom viewing was unpredictable, as I found that sometimes the system would work and sometimes it did not. I searched for ideas to make my virtual class as engaging as it would have been with face-to-face instruction. I was able to use breakout groups and guest speakers with relative ease on my part, but the guest speakers sometimes experienced problems signing into the online platform.

The first day of my fall 2020 class was spent showing students how to navigate Blackboard, where to find assignments including discussion boards, and how to submit their assignments. The learning curve was a bit slower for some of the non-traditional students who had not been in class for 10 or more years. As part of the first day of class, students were asked to introduce themselves and speak about what attracted them to the field of social work. Of 11 students, only two had undergraduate degrees in social work. Additionally, I thought it was important to ask students how they felt about the virtual instruction. A number of students did not appear pleased that the instruction would be virtual. While millennials are tech savvy, many were not pleased with the movement to online instruction as indicated by global responses to this newly mandated platform (Crawford et al., 2020; Jackson-Nevels et al., 2020; Toquero, 2020). One of my students had traveled from Korea to pursue her master's degree and expressed her disappointment at being deprived of the campus experience. Another non-traditional student indicated that she had been looking forward to coming to campus to again experience life as a college student. As the two-week period of the initial virtual instruction passed, several students asked when the class would assume the in-person format. The students were advised that only a few select courses would experience a face-to-face format, but our class would remain virtual. There was true disappointment for many of my students. They were uncertain how they might develop friendships and study groups to successfully navigate graduate school.

In the first few weeks of class, I incorporated a few YouTube videos to generate class discussions and also to infuse a bit of humor. I believe that humor and laughter are good during times of stress. We viewed "It's Not About the Nail" (Headley, 2013) to discuss communication issues between men and women. This video provided an opportunity to share a laugh. To help students understand that the pursuit of a graduate education required determination, we viewed "Famous Failures" (Motivating Success, 2012) and discussed the implications for self-determination. Each student was asked to take the Grit Test (Duckworth et al., 2007) and the Learning Styles Assessment (Learning-Styles-Online.com, n.d.) to identify how they learned and how much determination they possessed. Each assignment was designed to empower students in their quest for a graduate education.

On a weekly basis, I would conduct wellness checks with the students during the first few minutes of class to gauge their emotional and physical response to COVID-19 and the virtual learning platform. Over time, students began adjusting to the idea of virtual classes, though they still hoped the next semester would be different. While attending to the emotional needs of my students, I began to realize that I was succumbing to the emotional weight of the pandemic. In response to the governor's restrictions about where we could go, how many people could gather, and the closing of department stores, restaurants, and movie theaters, my spirits began to ebb and my energy level hit new lows. I was frequently tired and had difficulty sleeping. I realized that I needed to do something to keep myself out of the abyss of "the new normal." Feeling powerless is debilitating, and I realized that I needed to take control of how I would experience this pandemic. I fought hard emotionally to reject the idea of "the new normal" while still abiding by CDC guidance. To elevate my spirits, I began visiting home improvement stores to redecorate my home and engage in some much needed landscaping. This became a weekly activity for several months and helped me elude the COVID-19 abyss.

Initially, I saw myself as a victim, but this was not a role that was comfortable for me. I repeatedly had to remind myself that I was not a victim, but instead an active participant in my life direction. It was at this point that I realized I needed to take more control despite the pandemic and environmental restrictions. As restaurants were allowed to reopen, first with outside dining and then with occupancy restrictions for inside dining, I was able to make these restrictions work for me. Hand sanitizer, gloves, disinfecting wipes, social distancing, and face masks were the safeguards that allowed me some semblance of my former life.

Midway through the semester, I discovered that my sister had contracted COVID-19 and was extremely ill. Fear surfaced on so many levels. I had been eating out on a weekly basis in my attempt to establish my "new normal," but my sister had contracted this disease by staying home. For four months, she did not leave her house except for essentials and did not allow visitors. This made no sense to me. I began to question my new normal of eating out and shopping. The fear that my sister might actually succumb to this illness began to impact my emotional stability. I knew the emotional danger of isolation and had developed what I believed to be a viable and safe alternative to total isolation. I was provided this information about my

sister the day before my Tuesday morning class. As I gathered materials for my class, emotionally I felt ill-prepared to instruct my students. I considered cancelling my class, but I reminded myself that I was not a victim, but the instructor for my class. I engaged my class for the three-hour period and felt more in control for doing so. Over a period of a month, my sister slowly recovered from the deadly virus.

Within a few weeks of my sister's recovery, one of my students advised me that she had contracted COVID-19 through her internship. While she appeared weak, she advised me that hers was a mild case. Her illness developed just before she was scheduled to participate in a group presentation. I advised the student that she would certainly be excused from the presentation due to her illness, but she chose to present with her cohort. Bettinger and Loeb (2017) identified the flexibility of online classes as a benefit for students and this certainly proved valuable for my student. Had this student been engaged in the traditional face-to-face classroom, she would have been unable to present with her group due to risk of exposing others to her illness.

For graduate social work students, there was also a requirement for field practicum. Early in the semester, many students discovered that their field placements had to be altered or changed to meet Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requirements. Several practicum sites were no longer able to provide internship opportunities due to temporary closures. Some sites provided students with opportunities for telehealth services that allowed students to provide virtual assistance to clients from their home or dorm. A few sites reopened with limited hours but were still able to provide internship opportunities for our students. As the semester came to an end, I became aware that several students had contracted COVID-19 at their internship sites. These students observed the required 14-day quarantine and, despite contracting COVID-19, many returned to successfully complete their internship and the semester.

Several weeks prior to the end of my Social Work Profession class, I asked my students if they might be interested in sharing their thoughts and feelings about their graduate education and how their learning was affected by the pandemic. It was my hope that writing about their experience would be cathartic while also reinforcing their determination to move forward despite the uncertainty of a cure. Three students indicated an interest in sharing their story. Angela was a non-traditional student who had been in the workforce for more than seven years living abroad in Korea. Kayla entered the MSW program immediately after completing her undergraduate education and contracted COVID-19 during her first year as an MSW student. Briana was also a traditional student, entering the MSW program immediately after obtaining her undergraduate degree. Each student experienced disappointment related to how they expected their first year of graduate education to progress. Yet, each student discovered qualities within themselves that allowed them to take control and successfully navigate the horrors of a global pandemic. Some might describe this phenomenon as resilience, but van Breda (2018) suggests that resilience is a process as well as an outcome. Resilience as a process suggests the perception of having control over one's circumstances. The student stories presented reflect an internal locus of control in

how they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic as they progressed through their first year of graduate school. These students were also in the midst of a second pandemic—lethal policing. While the students do not discuss the impact of lethal policing and the Black Lives Matter movement, it is important to understand they were experiencing two pandemics. Two of the students were mixed-race and could have easily been a victim of lethal policing. The third student was Caucasian and might be expected to enjoy more privilege with respect to how she experienced both pandemics.

### "Disappointment in Efforts" … Angela's Story

The COVID-19 outbreak occurred during my time teaching English in South Korea. My sister Tonya and I moved to South Korea in 2013 and later met our best friend, Nathalie, during our time there. She had become like another sister to us. As our time in Korea was coming to an end, the three of us planned a final trip to Malaysia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, beginning on January 17, 2020. We were well into the second country of our three-country vacation when I first heard about the COVID-19 outbreak. My sister, Nathalie, and I were in Cambodia when I was scrolling through social media and a news article about an outbreak surfaced on my cellphone. We talked about it briefly, thinking it was just a new virus that people were catching, and did not think much more about it. It was not until we were flying back to South Korea on February 2, 2020, at the completion of our "sister vacation," that I began to understand the severity of this disease. The death rate was drastically increasing in the Asian countries and, within just a couple of weeks, South Korea was in disarray.

Earlier in 2019, I decided to leave South Korea to pursue a master's degree in social work. I finally knew what I wanted to do as a career and was eager to move back to the U.S. and begin my journey. I applied to a historically black college/university (HBCU) because I had never experienced that type of atmosphere. I was excited about attending an HBCU and experiencing campus life again. Despite my excitement about returning to college, the news was flooded with stories of skyrocketing numbers of people infected with the virus.

South Korea, fortunately, was able to gain some control of the situation. The first confirmed COVID-19 patient in South Korea was on January 20, 2020 (Cha & Kim, 2020). By February 17, 2020, there were 30 COVID-19 confirmed cases. It was not until "Patient 31" that the number of COVID-19 patients increased out of control. This patient lived in the third largest city in South Korea: Daegu (Cha & Kim, 2020). She was part of a large religious group and frequently traveled back and forth from Daegu to Seoul. She attended worship services consisting of over 1,000 people. "Patient 31" was the beginning of great fear within the country. The terrifying truth was that this one patient participated in a religious sect called "Shincheonji," which means "new heaven and new earth" (Shincheonji USA, n.d., para. 3). This sect is a large group that worships in tightly packed spaces; "Patient 31" had spent hours upon hours worshiping in these tight spaces, spreading the virus to thousands of members. The South

Korean government raised its health alert to the highest level, searching for the 212,000 members whose names were on a list provided by the sect (Bloomberg, 2020).

With all the turmoil occurring in South Korea and the East Asian countries, I began to worry about how the virus would impact the United States. My sister, best friend, and I stayed updated on the news and reports from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. In comparison to China and South Korea, the United States was not implementing significant measures to prevent the virus from entering the country. I felt so angry, disappointed, and worst of all, worried. Tonya, Nathalie, and I started hearing about travel restrictions and became concerned about whether we would be able to return home. My initial plan was to stay in South Korea for a couple of months before finally flying back to the United States. Tonya and Nathalie decided to leave earlier and flew out in February to avoid any delays or possible border closures.

While I was still in South Korea, living with my aunt on Jeju Island, the situation became increasingly worse in the U.S. South Korea, however, was able to gain control over the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In fact, Jeju Island seemed to be one of the safest places in South Korea and, as a result, I decided to stay longer than planned. While my friends and family were living in fear back in the U.S., I was living the life on a tropical island with my aunt, her daughter, and her friends. I was not ready to leave Korea any time soon.

As the start date of graduate school drew nearer, reality crept in. I became a bit nervous about going back to the U.S. after being away for seven years. I was also concerned about being a student again after so many years of being out of school. On top of that, the COVID-19 cases back home were steadily increasing. I finally flew out of South Korea on July 19, 2020. It was a surreal feeling when I finally arrived at my parents' home in Hampton, Virginia. I had to self-quarantine for at least 15 days. Quarantining was not much of a problem for me, as I enjoyed my time at home with my mother and stepfather. Although I spent most of my time at home, I had no negative feelings about my situation at the time.

As I prepared for the first day of graduate school, it was still unclear whether classes would be face-to-face or virtual. I became friends with a classmate in the MSW program. We discussed our concerns about the decision-making process used by the schools in the States. It felt like we were standing on a ledge waiting for the final verdict. When the final decision was made, I was pretty disappointed, as was my classmate. We were both looking forward to having in-person classes. As time went on, professors and students realized how difficult virtual synchronous learning could be. There were many technical problems with the school website, virtual classrooms, internet connections, and personal device issues. The university's Blackboard virtual platform provided many limitations, forcing professors to other platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. It seemed that most people were on the same page when it came to opinions on virtual learning; it was generally unfavored. I, on the other hand, was indifferent by the end of the semester. I had learned to enjoy being at home appreciating the ease of attending classes and

studying in the comfort of my own home. Considering how the federal and state governments were addressing the spread of COVID-19, I felt safer at home.

Despite the pandemic, graduate social work students were still required to complete internship hours. Some of my classmates had previously been assigned to locations that were not yet open due to COVID-19. These students were late starting their internship hours. However, I was at a location that allowed its staff to work from home. Our schedules were split, meaning we alternated office days. The interns were situated in one room while our school social work supervisors were in their personal offices. The K-12 schools were operating virtually; therefore, we had meetings with parents and faculty virtually as well. Towards the end of the semester, public schools were proposing to resume face-to-face classes. We were also scheduled to return to the office full-time. Everyone, the supervisors and interns, came back on a Wednesday. On Thursday, the first day I returned to the office, one of the interns learned that he came in contact with someone who had COVID-19. He immediately left and was tested for COVID-19. Many others also left early to get tested while the remaining interns and supervisors finished the day. The supervisor of the department then announced that work would be done from home for the remainder of the year. This situation was very stressful for everyone. The interns were worried about how they were going to acquire the required number of internship hours. Everyone was also highly anxious about whether they had COVID-19 or not.

As the fall 2020 semester came to an end, bad news struck again. The 2021 spring semester was also going to be virtual. While most of my classmates and professors grimaced at the news, I continued to feel indifferent. It upset me that people were still not doing what was necessary to stay safe to prevent the spread of COVID-19. I felt frustrated, annoyed, angry, disappointed, and embarrassed at the state of COVID-19 intervention efforts by my country compared to other countries. I think the United States was once seen as the most powerful or favored country in the world. However, now, the U.S. government seemed to be failing to uphold its past reputation, looking weak in the eyes of other countries.

I am frustrated and annoyed by people who choose to be careless when in public places, putting the lives of those around them at risk. My anger comes from the slow response of the U.S. government to provide necessary assistance to its citizens. COVID-19 created a worldwide emergency that required a more aggressive and rapid response. In South Korea, the government used mass text alerts and phone applications to keep the citizens informed on the locations an infected person visited as well as the number of infected persons. They also used surveillance cameras to track the movement of the infected person. These are only a couple of examples from the many actions South Korea had taken to keep its people safe and informed.

During the winter break, more and more people were becoming infected with the seasonal flu virus and colds. Being infected by the flu virus or a cold along with COVID-19 may cause higher risks of developing more severe symptoms (Sharp Health Care, 2020). The rise in the number of sick individuals was causing me some anxiety because I was worried about my

friends and family. I was happy that the 2021 spring semester would be held virtually. Just knowing that I did not have to place myself in a potentially unsafe environment or situation or risk exposure to my family and friends reduced my anxiety.

People are experiencing and displaying a variety of emotions; many of these emotions are warranted due to the current living conditions. People are afraid and finding it difficult to change their lifestyles so abruptly. However, the only way to see any progress is by working together and taking all necessary precautions. We must also put more pressure on the government to provide more assistance for its citizens. Only then will we see any change in our current situation.

### "I Didn't Expect This to Happen to Me" … Kayla's Story

The COVID-19 pandemic has had its influence on this country and has impacted the way individuals live their lives. In March of 2020, I was sent home during the senior year of my undergraduate studies due to this pandemic. I did not know what to think at first, but as classes switched to being virtual, I learned how to adapt. The virtual classes became a challenge to the school and some students. This new way of learning and teaching created some technology challenges and required rapid adaptation on everyone's part. The new way of learning and thinking came down to being adaptable for the year of 2020.

When I first heard that I was accepted at Norfolk State University for my master's, I was so excited because I would be able to attend a school that was close to home and follow my passion in social work. I knew that it would be a great experience because I had heard positive comments about the master of social work program and its various professors. Although I was excited to attend this university, I still had fears about what the upcoming semester would look like due to the pandemic. All I knew in the current moment was that I was trying to make it through undergraduate school and receive my bachelor's degree. At that point, I began to think less about what starting my master's program would entail.

Fast forward a few months. I had been questioning what to expect for my first semester of graduate school. I had already experienced virtual classes, but I had no idea what the upcoming semester would involve. I watched all the surrounding colleges and universities announce they were going to have virtual learning; however, I had heard nothing from my new school. The not knowing caused some anxiety because I am a planner. It was not until a week or two before the start of classes that I learned I would be participating in remote synchronous courses except for having to attend my field placement in person. I was relieved to hear the news because I did not want to risk my health attending a school where thousands of other students would be during the peak of the pandemic. I was also overwhelmed and irritated because I felt like I should have known what instruction was going to look like at least a month prior to the start of classes.

Being a graduate student and trying to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic was not as challenging as I expected it to be. Having the previous experience of switching quickly to virtual learning during undergraduate school allowed me to prepare for what was to come as a graduate student. The transition for me was smooth; however, being virtual requires you to be a diligent student and keep track of your assignments. When you are attending in-person courses, it is imperative to prepare for classes. As an in-person student, you must get out of bed and leave your room to attend class. With virtual courses, you have to motivate yourself to get out of bed, log in to the computer, and complete your coursework in a timely manner.

A challenge that most people, including myself, have faced is ensuring those with whom you share a home understand that when you are attending classes, you need to focus and should not be distracted. Sometimes you have traditions you do with your family such as eating together at a certain time; however, those have to be broken at times when you have a late-night class. Ensuring your family understands is essential. There are times where you must tell your friends and family no: No, you cannot do something that they want you to do, because you have to focus on your coursework.

Adjusting to the accommodations that come with family and coursework did come up during my time of virtual instruction. I typically have a routine when I am home such as when I eat dinner with my parents; however, that changed once I participated in virtual instruction. When I was away at school during my undergraduate years, I did not have this issue, because I had a different routine than I do now. Being home during my graduate years has been an adjustment because I cannot just walk into my professor's office to see if they are available to talk or provide assistance as I would if I was in-person. Professors are available virtually; however, this is not the same as it would be if I was physically present in their office.

I believe having in-person interactions with professors and colleagues is essential because it helps build strong relationships, increases classroom engagement, and facilitates effective communication. As a result of the virtual instruction, I was never able to physically meet my peers, classmates, or professors. The only time I would see and interact with them was behind a screen during class, through email, or in our occasional group chats. Due to this recent experience, I now know what to expect for next semester. I have learned that participating in study groups via Zoom or connecting with colleagues through group chats will help me get through my second semester of my MSW because it enhances my understanding of various assignments or topics.

Living during the COVID-19 pandemic as a graduate student has been both simple and challenging. I was always on top of my assignments. I typically submitted them well in advance to not overwhelm myself with the number of assignments I had. I showed up to my field practicum and completed the required hours I needed with no problems. I started to enjoy virtual instruction and did not mind participating in class discussions. Often, I would hear my colleagues complaining about virtual instruction and how they wished it was in-person;

however, I was content with the way instruction would be delivered. I found waking up, getting out of bed, getting ready, and logging in for class came naturally to me. I will admit participating in an online course that was three hours long was quite challenging because staring at a screen that long was tiring. However, on the bright side, I did not have to deal with some of the technological challenges that my colleagues experienced.

I enjoyed attending courses online; however, I got comfortable at home, which some days made it difficult to leave the house to participate in my field practicum. It seemed like my first semester as a virtual graduate student was going great until I got closer to the end of the semester. There were two weeks of instruction left when I tested positive for COVID-19. Testing positive was one of the most challenging experiences I ever encountered. Trying to finish out the semester strong while being very fatigued with massive headaches was a challenge that I knew I had to push through to overcome and make it through the semester.

Who would have thought I would have been diagnosed with this virus towards the end of the semester? I remember sitting there crying when I found out that I tested positive because I have a high-risk parent, and I knew I had so much work that was about to be due. My instructors were very understanding when I told them I had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Some of them offered me extensions on my assignments or the opportunity to forgo presentations, while others did not offer any accommodations. I was, however, grateful that my instructors were understanding that I would need to take some breaks during class because I felt very tired as a result of COVID-19. I struggled those last two weeks with being motivated to complete my assignments. Every time I tried to work on a paper, I suffered from a terrible headache that caused me to have to stop and come back later. Eventually, I was able to complete all of my assignments and finish out my first semester as a graduate student. Although I tested positive for COVID-19, I believe the virtual instruction period went well, and I cannot wait to see what future courses will look like. I discovered that the key to a successful virtual experience during this pandemic is time management and organization.

My first semester in the MSW program at Norfolk State University has allowed me to learn a number of different skills that I will be able to utilize next semester. Time management was essential to being successful because it allowed me to not fall behind even when I was dealing with COVID-19 firsthand. I learned that I am capable of succeeding in the midst of a pandemic if I continue to use time management, have a positive attitude, know that I'm not alone in feeling overwhelmed some days, and plan ahead with my assignments. This is important for anyone who is participating in virtual instruction.

### "Altered Expectations" … Briana's Story

I dreamed about my senior year of undergrad for many years and could not wait to be a second-semester senior. The second semester was off to a quick start, and I thought I was ready to graduate. I was counting down the days to senior send-off, cap and gown distribution, finals

week, and finally… commencement. As February approached, I started to realize just how close I was to finishing and having a degree. I was taking it all in, but I was ready to graduate.

Shortly before my last spring break of undergrad, my university began sending email after email providing updates on "COVID-19" in China. It seemed like nothing to worry about. After all, it was in China only. I questioned why they sent so many informational emails about a virus I had never heard about. I usually skimmed over the email and then deleted it without any worry or afterthoughts. A few weeks after the emails started, I packed my car and drove eight hours home, just like I did for any other semester break. However, little did I know, I had attended my last in-person class and the last day of my internship within that same week.

During spring break, I saw COVID-19 all over the news and social media. The United States had its first case, and the outbreak quickly spread like wildfire. On March 11, I went to breakfast with some of my friends like we normally did when we were home for breaks. We talked, laughed, and caught up with each other for a while. Our conversation seemed to hover over COVID-19 and all of the "what ifs." One of my friends received a text saying that a few universities in Pennsylvania had extended spring break by a week. We were hopeful that our universities would do the same and were excited about a longer break. Before we left, I remember my friend saying, "This is only going to get worse." I was skeptical of the severity at that time. I texted my former volleyball coach to see if she knew anything about my university. She said she had not heard anything yet but would keep me updated. The next day, I received a text from my coach telling me that I should stay home because classes would be virtual until April.

Shortly after, I received an email stating that spring break was extended by a week and that we would resume with virtual classes until April 5th. I felt distraught and had many mixed emotions. Despite all that I felt, I decided to drive back to school for the "virtual" part of my semester. However, the month or so of virtual learning turned into the rest of my final semester. Every day we received updates about what the rest of the semester would look like. My professors scrambled to make emergency learning plans for the remainder of the semester. It was extremely unorganized and pure chaos. Most of my professors chose to complete the semester asynchronously. They pushed out what felt like busy work and hardly communicated with the class. I did not feel like I was learning at all.

As this dreadful and unexpected semester continued, I remained hopeful that I would get through it, and used commencement as the light at the end of the tunnel. Unfortunately, my in-person commencement was postponed and held virtually. After four long years, I watched my name scroll across the TV screen in my living room without my classmates, professors, or mentors there to celebrate our accomplishments together. Despite the chaotic ending of my undergrad, I found peace in knowing I would start my master's degree in person the next fall.

The summer leading up to my first semester of graduate school was busy with preparing for higher education and navigating my way through a new university. I felt much uncertainty because I did not have a plan and knew things could change so quickly. I received email after email, again, with updates on the fall semester. In late July, we received an email stating that our first two weeks would be virtual, but in-person classes would begin after that. However, two weeks of synchronous online lectures turned into the entire semester.

Day after day, I logged onto Blackboard and prepared myself for six hours of lecture. I sat at my laptop at my dining room table and attempted to take in as much as I could in such a setting. At first, the lectures felt longer and lonelier each class. I did not know any of my professors and had never met any of my new classmates. However, my professors knew the stress virtual learning placed on each of us. Most of them started class by doing a check-in with each student. During the check-ins, we shared stressors, worries, and positive notes with one another. The check-ins reminded me I was not alone in this experience and also helped me to bond with my classmates. It was hard to build a support group during a virtual setting but, as the semester progressed, I found myself emailing my professors for guidance or texting my classmates for extra help.

From emergency remote learning plans and a canceled graduation ceremony to long online lectures at a new university, the fall 2020 semester was an unforgettable experience. The semester felt never-ending. I never expected to feel as accomplished as I did, or to feel like I learned as much as I did. However, I embraced my virtual classroom and internship, and I decided to focus on the positive side. I took in as much as I could and had a much better experience than I imagined. Although COVID-19 altered learning for so many, I was glad to be safe and healthy. I look forward to returning to a classroom setting one day; I would not say I prefer virtual lectures. Despite my preference for face-to-face instruction, this fall semester had prepared me for another virtual semester. I have learned what works best for me and how to get the most out of a virtual classroom. I quickly learned there were a lot of distractions at home. I limited my distractions by attending lectures in our home office and sitting at a desk. This helped make home feel more like the classroom. I used my laptop to access lectures and be present in class while I used my iPad to take notes and look at different assignments. I also made sure to make the most of my breaks between classes by getting up from my desk and stepping away from my work. While this was my experience, it's important to recognize that this was most definitely not the case for everyone, and this comes from a place of privilege. I was ready to tackle the spring semester, one online lecture at a time.

## Conclusion

The lived experiences of Angela, Kayla, and Briana presented similar concerns and experiences in how they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, all three students had similar expectations of graduate education. As they became aware of the instructional platform, all were disappointed with the virtual format for their first semester of graduate instruction. As time progressed, each student was able to exercise control over their current challenges by adapting to

the circumstances of COVID-19, taking in new information, asking for assistance, and developing a plan to succeed. This internal locus of control mediated their challenges and resulted in their ability to be resilient. The experiences of these students suggest an opportunity for future research to delineate the specific strategies, coping mechanisms, supports, and resources that allow some students to mount an effective proactive response to stressors associated with matters beyond their control.

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# Personal and Professional Explorations During a Dual Pandemic from Two Social Work Professors

Brie Radis and Hadih Deedat

**Abstract:** We identify as two early career Bachelor of Social Work faculty—a Black, cisgender male, and first-generation immigrant; and a cisgender white queer mother in my second career. We wanted to offer an intimate story about our experience learning and growing during a dual pandemic, one being COVID-19 (Amadasun, 2020; Miller & Lee, 2020) and the other being racial injustices with the shared witnessing of the murders of Black Americans (Sobo et al., 2020). Following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Walter Wallace Jr., and other people of color in 2020 and 2021, we facilitated seminars on anti-oppressive, trauma-informed education practice (TIEP) to faculty, staff, and students at our academic institution during the 2020-2021 academic year. We both practice anti-oppressive, trauma-informed teaching, and this manuscript focuses on our professional explorations with our students and each other during the pandemic.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, teaching, parallel process, anti-oppressive trauma-informed teaching practice, coping

## Introduction

In the early months of 2020, conversations about the "emerging, distant" coronavirus (COVID-19) sporadically took place in each of the spring semester classes that we taught. We and our students were not yet worried about a virus that appeared to be restricted to the Asian continent, specifically to Wuhan, China. After all, China and the United States are a world apart, so why should we (students and professors) burden ourselves with the thought of the virus reaching the shores of the United States and infiltrating our campus from thousands of miles away? Further, if the virus were to become a serious threat to the people of the United States—often self-proclaimed to be the most technologically advanced, intelligent, economically powerful, and prepared country—we would handle it with much ease, or so we thought until the middle of March 2020.

The reality of COVID-19 quickly struck when, on March 13, 2020, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared the virus a national emergency of grave public health concern (CDC, 2020a). Prior to this declaration, we were aware of the lurking virus through the infrequent communications that our university sent out, but the university's own struggles to provide consistent, clear messages about COVID-19 only reinforced our belief that academic plans would continue uninterrupted. We were clearly mistaken and misguided. No sooner had we gone on our 2020 spring break than professors received a cache of emails from our university advising that campuses would be shut down due to COVID-19, and that professors would not regain access to the campuses until further notice. Professors at our university were also advised to start preparing to switch all face-to-face and hybrid teaching modalities to 100 percent remote modalities. This abrupt change announced in early March completely caught us and our students

off-guard. Our experiences following the CDC's declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic, the closure of our university's campuses, and the lockdown of cities/towns that ensued are discussed below.

## Our Dual Pandemic Experiences: COVID-19 & Racial Injustice Protests

Our experiences related to the COVID-19 pandemic cut through both our personal and professional lives as a collective trauma where both instructors and students had similar challenging experiences about everyday life (Tosone, 2021). These personal and professional experiences overlap in unique ways for each of us. We also acknowledge the parallel process that these experiences brought up for both of us, and the impacts of the blending of boundaries between personal and professional roles on our teaching relationships (Baum, 2010; Sapiro, 2021). Some examples around these mutual experiences include grief and loss, ethical dilemmas around staying physically safe by following the COVID-19 CDC recommendations versus participating in the call to justice by protesting, the impact of increased caretaking, job changes, and challenges with technology. Techniques including safety-first practices, self-care, tuning in, parallel processing, and mutual aid practices were adopted to help us and our students deal with the harsh realities presented by the two life-altering experiences.

### Brie's Story

"It's just too much. I don't think I can do this anymore…working, school, taking care of my family," said one of my Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC)-identifying social work students[1], who bravely spoke up in class late October 2020. Other students nodded their heads in agreement. Another student chimed in, sharing that they felt overwhelmed and disconnected learning online, especially since a family member was sick with COVID-19. Another student shared they had lost a family member, and others shared they had lost several friends and family members in recent weeks and that it was very difficult to concentrate on their work while grieving and being pulled in different directions. This conversation came out of a prompt for students to talk about their field placement experiences since everything felt so different this year—some students were remote or hybrid, and those in-person were often under enormous pressure to stay safe and follow the agency's protocol (Mitchell et al., 2021). I asked if they were feeling supported by their field instructors and by me, their professor and field liaison. Notably, this BSW seminar class was composed entirely of post-traditional transfer social work students, mainly BIPOC-identifying students, who were in their final year of college.

Another student shared that she was relieved we were finally talking about this, because it felt like professors were keeping the syllabus the same despite it being a pandemic, and that it felt like we were just doing everything as if it were a normal year. This statement also received a lot of agreement from peers. I listened intently to all these comments, feeling that it was important to make space and time for everyone to share, but I could see that we were running out of time.

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[1]To maintain the confidentiality of my students, responses are composites

Just as I was saying that we did not have much time left, and that I was glad to hear their thoughts, one of my students interrupted to say that there had just been a shooting near her home—Walter Wallace Jr. (a Black father diagnosed with a serious and persistent mental illness) had just been killed by police (Gross, 2020). I am not sure exactly what I said in response—something about this being devastating—but class was then over as quickly as it had begun. It was jarring and unsettling, just like the repeated injustices committed against Black individuals—in this case, while the individual was having a mental health crisis—during a time of systemic racial oppression as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

I contemplated how to proceed with this course going forward to best meet the needs of both the group and individual students. It was challenging to figure out how to respond to the tension between devoting time and energy to emotionally process the content and also to cover the curriculum. I followed up with the class the next morning with a short video checking in and also an email letting them know I was thinking of each of them; I also wanted to share some university resources such as counseling and a peer group (Darby & Lang, 2019). I shared my office hours with a Zoom link, and a handful of students came to check in during these times. I also shared that our next class would start with a longer mindful moment (a meditative moment of silence where a guided meditation or song is offered and followed up with a longer silence) than usual, and that we'd have time to check in and process together in both a larger group and in smaller groups. Later, the students said they appreciated that I had reached out immediately following that class. This reflects the findings by Darby and Lang (2019), who encourage frequent communication such as videos and check-in posts to connect with students when teaching online. My students shared that this helped them contain and deal with some of their related stressors. In response to the tension around limited time and conflicting needs within the classroom, I took one of our classes and divided it up into 20-minute-long individual meetings.

I could relate to some of my students' sentiments. I had not wanted to admit it to myself, but I was feeling exhausted and uninspired. During the earlier class dialogue, multiple students with connectivity problems had lost their internet connection, and at least a third of the students had their cameras off for this intimate discussion—despite my invitation for them to turn them on (McCarthy et al., 2021). According to a recent Pew Research Survey (Perrin, 2021), 15 percent of all internet users use their cell phones as their sole source of technology and do not have broadband access at home. It was also noted that 30 percent of users still have problems with their home internet, and another 34 percent struggle to pay their bill since COVID-19 (Perrin, 2021). My own internet had also presented challenges and kicked me off in the middle of presenting a new social work concept; as a result, students had become frustrated during our disjointed class time. I began to feel embarrassed by technological barriers on my end. How was I supposed to support my students emotionally and academically when they could not even hear what I was saying?

While my students shared on Zoom, I could hear my first and third grade children struggling with bedtime from my makeshift home office. They were used to me working outside the home and, when I was home, I was usually emotionally and physically available to be with them and

engage in family activities. I felt torn—here I was at home, trying to be there for my students, while also yearning to support my family by being patient and supportive during this tough time (Green & O'Reilly, 2021). My own health was suffering, as I had significant weight gain and had reinjured my back, so I was struggling to be mobile while remaining productive with my work. My partner had left her job teaching art to take care of my immunocompromised mother who was living in our home. Our third grader was being homeschooled and needed one-on-one kinetic and creative instruction, while our first grader had virtual learning but needed someone nearby to supervise them because it was so challenging to stay on task. With our new schedules, my partner was doing most of our children's teaching, childcare, and caretaking, which resulted in long hours, and her own mental health was suffering. My role as friend, sister, and community member also experienced challenging changes. I was used to being the one in my community who supported friends and family but, during this time, I felt limited in being able to support loved ones as much as I usually did. Many of my close friends were dealing with loss and increased stress around caretaking responsibilities due to COVID-19, and many were also experiencing collective trauma related to white supremacy (Watson et al., 2020).

I also longed to be a steady, dependable, and nurturing educator during this pandemic, and it was challenging to feel like I was doing enough. I felt like if I could just answer emails more quickly, return papers faster with feedback, be more cheerful, or be clearer or more organized with my teaching synchronous Zoom sessions or assignments, then I could make learning easier for my students. I heard their pain and frustration, and I felt like I was failing my students. My usual strategies as an experienced trauma-informed educator were not working, and my students were experiencing collective trauma in multiple ways from the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice; many of them were Black, and/or employed as frontline workers in nursing homes, grocery stores, and hospitals, and were expected to take care of family members (Amadasun, 2020; Miller & Lee, 2020; Sobo et al., 2020). Despite my white privilege and the freedom to work remotely, I was also struggling to sleep, eat well, and make time to connect with colleagues and friends. I knew from Hadih, my colleague, as well as my research on undergraduate students in spring 2020 (towards the beginning of the pandemic), that our social work students had been especially resilient to stress and counted faculty as one of their main supports during the pandemic (Deedat et al., in press). I was not sure what I would do next, but my students needed additional support, and I didn't have a lot of time to figure this out.

I realized that, while I wanted things to be different, I also needed more support. I am usually a very independent person and have a high stress tolerance. I thrived on challenges, and I had loved my last job where I had fifteen years in community mental health working with individuals experiencing chronic homelessness and serious mental health challenges. While I longed to practice daily mindfulness or yoga that had worked in the past to cope with stress, I was unable to integrate these self-care activities into my daily practice. I would wake up feeling overwhelmed, and I wouldn't know where to start, which reflected the sentiments my students had expressed. I did, however, go outside whenever I could to jog, walk, or play with my kids and get a break from the persistent Zoom fatigue (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020). When I felt overwhelmed and tired, I intentionally invested more time in meeting with colleagues in a

peer-led mutual aid supervision group to brainstorm challenges; I felt that meeting with individuals outside of my university would provide a safe boundary (Wenocur et al., 2020). At times, it felt like I was working seven days a week, morning, day, and night. As soon as I realized this pattern, I would try to step away to engage in work that did not require being at a computer. That said, when you work where you live and your children are in your workspace, it becomes really challenging to create these boundaries (Sapiro, 2021).

**Hadih's Story**

The shutdown of our university campuses, the requirement to switch all classes to remote modes of instruction, and the lockdown of the city and state in which I resided in the initial stages of the pandemic made me dread what was to come. As a husband, a father to two incredibly young children, and as a son to an immigrant mother with little command of the English language, I suddenly felt the weight of the disruption in teaching modality. My positions as a husband, father, and son mean that I have multiple responsibilities to juggle, and I had been successful in carrying out my faculty-related responsibilities in the past by carefully planning my personal life, including plans for some emergencies during a semester. However, I had never planned for an emergency of this magnitude.

Personally, one of the most challenging barriers created by the sudden switch to remote teaching was an overreliance on an unreliable internet service. Before the pandemic, our children (three and five years old) were attending early childhood education (ECE) programs. On weekdays, they spent considerable time during the day at their ECE centers. I also spent a good amount of time at my campus offices preparing my courses and working on other faculty-related responsibilities. The pandemic would change everything. From the middle of the spring 2020 semester to now, my wife and I have had to work from home, and we have had to use internet-heavy study programs to instruct our children. We had become dependent on internet services to get our work done and to help educate our children, just as much of the world has (Dé et al., 2020). Unfortunately, this experience has offered little to cheer about. I have had to sign on and off during remote synchronous classes, re-arrange classes, and apologize to students due to an inconsistent, sometimes terrible internet connection—despite my family paying more money to our internet services provider for a stronger internet connection.

Working remotely has continued to negatively impact me well beyond these internet accessibility difficulties. The physical and psychological toll has been immense. Initially, I thought that not having to commute to two campuses was going to ensure physical health benefits. Unfortunately, working from home turned out to be more disadvantageous. From sitting behind my desk for hours on end to completing practically every task by being glued to a computer screen, I have been struggling with back pains and other forms of physical stress. I have visited my virtual doctor three times since March 2020 to complain about my physical health. Unsurprisingly, the doctor's diagnoses of my concerns have been related to my constant sitting and remaining in one position for longer hours than usual. Based on my doctor's advice, I made some significant changes to ergonomically improve my workspace, but the physical health

risks and adverse effects from working remotely have not been eliminated. The uncertainty shrouding the pandemic and my apprehension as a Black person in the age of COVID-19 continues to present a psychological toll. These experiences are shared by a lot of my students, especially students at the university's campus in an urban, predominantly Black community.

To date, I am still struggling with the capricious nature of the pandemic and its outlook for my family's safety and security. The thought of not knowing for sure if life will return to some form of normalcy has been psychologically challenging. Conflicting, incoherent messages on the virus churned out daily by public health experts and government officials have only increased this uncertainty. Worse, seeing some health professionals—once a source of hope to fight the pandemic—succumb to the very uncertainty that I am struggling with only affirms my own fears. While the unpredictability related to COVID-19 cannot be eliminated, Koffman et al. (2020) argued that it can be managed far better than is done now to minimize its damage. Managing my own COVID-19-related uncertainty would require receiving consistent, coherent messages, data, and facts from those tasked with providing these pieces of information.

A psychological toll of COVID-19 with which my BIPOC-identifying students and I are saddled is directly related to my race and ethnicity. As a Black person, the sheer knowledge of the alarming COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death rates among Black or African American people has increased my fear and trepidation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020b), non-Hispanic Blacks or African Americans are 1.4 times, 3.7 times, and 2.8 times more likely to be infected, hospitalized, and die, respectively, from COVID-19, compared to non-Hispanic whites. The disparities in COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths among Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native (non-Hispanic), and Asian (non-Hispanic) people mirror that of Blacks and African Americans.

As a Black person with a Latina spouse and children, the COVID-19-related disparities have heightened my psychological stress because my family, close friends, and most of my students at the university's urban campus identify as BIPOC, and BIPOC-identifying individuals are likely to have lower access to needed treatment and to experience less culturally responsive care (SAMHSA, 2020). While my students—BIPOC-identifying students especially—and I strongly hope for a quick return to some form of normal life, our hope to first overcome the COVID-related psychological stress has been hampered by the disparities in COVID infection, hospitalization, and death rates, and by the distrust in the emerging and available COVID vaccines within the BIPOC community. Sadly, the distrust of the COVID vaccines by BIPOC-identifying individuals is attributable to the underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minority groups in COVID-19 clinical trials (Chastain et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the slayings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among other unjustified murders of Black people by white police officers (or white civilians, in the case of Arbery), exacerbated an already devastating time within BIPOC communities. Though ethical dilemmas are very common within the social work profession (NASW, 2021), the police brutality of young Black people in 2020 did not only worsen the impacts of the ravaging

COVID-19 pandemic on my students and myself, but it also presented a novel dilemma that required a lot of processing and a profound, careful decision-making approach. Like myself, several of my students, regardless of their racial identity, shared how they found themselves at a crossroads during the protests against racial injustice that erupted across the nation following the murders of George Floyd and others. On the one hand, my students and I wanted to follow the COVID-19 guideline of avoiding large crowds to help reduce the possibility of infection and transmission of the virus. On the other hand, if we were to sit aloof during these protests, this would be acting in direct contrast to the call to social justice, a fundamental ethical tenet of the social work profession (NASW, 2021).

In addition to the self-care practices that Brie and I adopted for ourselves and for our students (discussed in detail under the "Tuning In, Parallel Process, and Mutual Aid as Pandemic Teaching Tools" subheading of this paper), I also incorporated and encouraged class discussions around safety to help my students and I deal with the presenting dilemma. First, I made sure to place the safety of myself and of my students above everything else in the face of these two traumatic events. In fact, an individual's safety is considered the foremost step in any trauma-informed practice (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2018), and there had never been a better time to teach and practice from a trauma-informed lens than in the throes of a COVID-19 pandemic and national (and international) outrage and protests over the brutality of police against Black people in the United States. The safety technique that I adopted was to constantly remind myself that my emotional, physical, and mental safety was paramount and needed to be safeguarded in the face of the two competing events. I reminded myself that, in order for me to live another day and fight any and all forms of current and future injustices, I needed to participate in the racial injustice protests with as much COVID-19 caution that helped protect myself and my fellow protestors. In other words, I saw it pertinent to not choose my individual safety by completely disregarding what was in the best interest of the collective—fighting for a fair and just society—but I also wanted to make sure that I was helping address the two events in a careful, safe manner. I shared this approach with my students; through class discussions, it became apparent that students found the approach to be practical and thoughtful, in that it allowed a person to confront the two events simultaneously but in a less endangering way.

## Our Shared Context, Intersectional Identities, and Roles

We are both Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), early career, untenured undergraduate social work faculty members at a large public university in Pennsylvania: One of us identifies as a Black, cisgender male, as well as a first-generation immigrant, and the other identifies as a white, queer, cisgender, female, clinical social worker. We also serve as academic and extracurricular advisors to our students. In addition to these roles, Brie serves as a field liaison to her students who are in the field. Brie's experience is in clinical work with families and individuals and as a clinical supervisor and team leader in the field of community mental health and chronic homelessness, while Hadih's experience is in social services for underserved and low-income communities. Hadih also has extensive professional experience working in the child welfare system, which, due to factors such as poverty and racial discrimination, lack of informal and formal supports,

and worker bias, is disproportionately overrepresented by Black children (Chibnall et al., 2003; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Both of us have a similar teaching philosophy and use anti-oppressive, trauma-informed pedagogy (Sherwood et al., 2021). We both love teaching and engaging with students from a strengths perspective and meeting them where they are in their social work processes (Rapp et al., 2006).

What is unique about our teaching roles is that we teach and advise on both a large suburban campus made up of traditional college-aged students and on a smaller urban campus that operates in both the afternoon and evenings for post-traditional aged college students. The campuses are physically over an hour apart and, while different in many ways, the curriculum we teach and the commitment we provide as faculty in our courses and as advisors is similar, though the delivery methods may vary due to educational pedagogy best practice. While Brie focuses on teaching seminar, advanced policy, generalist practice, and practice field work classes as a field liaison to students, as well as an elective on mental health and substance use, Hadih teaches core classes such as the generalist social work practice and human behavior in the social environment courses. He also teaches a university-wide diversity course, Race Relations, as well as shares his expertise in child welfare in the undergraduate Child Welfare Policy and Practice course.

As the end of the second semester of teaching during COVID-19 drew closer, we paused to reflect together and individually on what had worked and what had not worked with the curriculum, formats, teaching prompts, and assignments, so that we could incorporate student feedback and our own observations into our future classes. Students shared in the chat on Zoom, via email response, anonymously via Google Forms, and verbally in class. We also devised a series of forums to discuss this pedagogy across different disciplines. After we reviewed the cumulative feedback and reflected on our experiences, we devised two thematic interrelated areas of teaching interventions that we utilized in the spring and summer 2021 terms and plan to build on going forward. First, we used the collective social work skills of tuning in, parallel process, and mutual aid as instructors and then used this knowledge as a reflective tool to guide discussions and assignments, and concurrently integrated in the frame of anti-oppressive, trauma-informed pedagogy (Dean, 2019; Sherwood et al., 2021; Shulman, 2015).

## Tuning In, Parallel Process, Modeling and Mutual Aid as Pandemic Teaching Tools with an Anti-Oppressive, Abolitionist, Trauma-Informed Teaching Pedagogy

In traumatic moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic and instances of racial injustice experienced by our students and ourselves, the utilization of the social work skill of tuning in becomes particularly important. We have been utilizing the tuning-in skill—which involves a worker's (in this instance, a professor's) efforts to understand and relate to a client's (a student's, in this instance) actual and potential feelings, concerns, beliefs, or values—to build empathy for and awareness of students' feelings, emotions, and concerns (Shulman, 2015). To generate empathic response, we make sure to ask sensitive questions at the beginning of each class session, as well as encourage students to see the dual pandemic from their own views,

experiences, and situations. We continue to see educational and cultural benefits of using the tuning-in skill in our classrooms during the dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racial injustice. Not only have a significant number of students disclosed that the empathy and awareness they received from us made them feel respected, appreciated, and comforted, but we have also witnessed how our own self-awareness has helped us increase our work toward the development of cultural competence and sensitivity (Heydt & Sherma, 2005).

Parallel process can be used as a reflective tool in teaching when both students and teachers reflect on their similar shared experiences and use these reflections to change and design real time interventions (Miller, 2004). Social work instructors and students can use the feelings projected on to them as a tool to assist them in navigating dynamics with their peers, clients, and supervisors. In addition, use of self and authenticity can be used as relational teaching tools to increase teacher effectiveness especially with adult learners (Wang, 2011; Clemans, 2021). One example of parallel process and shared collective trauma was around the shared grief experiences by both us and our students. We mourned the loss of relationships, in-person connection, and the normative rites of passage such as graduation or in-person BSW field experiences. This is similar to Sapiro's (2021) discussion around parallel process where instructors also experienced collective grief experiences with their students around the loss of rituals that symbolize life transitions, normalcy, and private spaces to work, live, and learn in, as well as loss of income and family, autonomy, and faith in the future. Due to the shared collective trauma of the dual pandemic, students were encouraged to use these topics in class and in field supervision (Tosone, 2021). We also created new rituals such as class playlists, Google picture books about favorite college moments and classes, silly check-ins (i.e., our favorite study snack, or something funny we had recently watched), and made self-care plans to get us by from week to week.

As we instructors made more space to reflect on the social and political context, we regularly acknowledged that this was a pandemic, and that life was challenging. For example, we all wanted smooth Wi-Fi connectivity and to have screens on to connect with each other, but there would be some moments where we were unable to prevent issues. We would continue to try our best and to communicate with one another. In addition, if students did not want to have a camera on during seminar and group discussions, they should reach out to their instructor (Day & Verbiest, 2021; Marquart, 2021); we preferred cameras to be on, but we also were sensitive to unique circumstances. This addressed the students' request that we not proceed as business as usual; we needed to name and be flexible to the uncertain world we were all living in.

We made more space for mutual aid, which is complementary to parallel process (Clemans, 2021; Spade, 2020). Rooted in group work, mutual aid—which emphasizes and encourages group members to respond to other group members' needs and form supportive relationships—has proven to be a helpful, effective group dynamics approach that has positively impacted our engagement with our students. Through power-sharing (one of the core principles of mutual aid) with students, we have employed mutual aid to increase and highlight collaboration with and resourcefulness of students respectively. In line with Cohen and

Graybeal's (2007) findings, our students have shown a sense of personal and interpersonal control during virtual classes.

In addition to the interventions that were adopted to address the earlier ethical dilemma surrounding protesting in person for social justice or following the CDC guidelines to stay safe from COVID-19, we also processed these tensions in class by listening to student's diverse decisions and by sharing our own experiences. Using Marc Lamont Hill's (2020) text, *We Still Here: Police, Pandemic, Protest, and Possibility*, we explored Hill's own ethical dilemma to create social change in the streets and his fears around putting his vulnerable family members at risk. His complex decision to find alternative ways to create change while still participating in social action measures were weaved into our ethical decision-making discussions and inspired the assignments in our class. These assignments echo both Hill's (2020) and Bettina L. Love's (2019) call to civic action and participatory democratic education to create social change and justice. In our Advanced Social Policy social work class, we went from learning about how to use alternative social justice tools to doing assignments such as writing a policy memo to a social policy-maker like a governor or a state senator; crafting opinionated editorials that evoked empathy but also used facts; supporting and creating petitions; and honing the skills and tools necessary to give a five minute live oral testimony about a current social issue. Students left the course feeling empowered and skilled to actively engage in civic action.

Students also highlighted that the anti-oppressive TIEP (trauma-informed education practice) strategies such as safety and transparency they experienced in the classroom could then be applied to their field placements and coursework. While our students still expressed anxiety and fear that they would not be prepared when they graduated to practice social work, we talked about the new skills and knowledge that they had acquired. We highlighted the strength perspective by individualizing the growth and challenges of each student (Rapp et al., 2006). Using Love's (2019) abolitionist teaching framework, we, as instructors, deviated from some outdated practice examples in the assigned texts, instead using current events and examples of the courage and hope of folx resisting white supremacy to illustrate social work theory and practice. We used strength-based and liberatory examples from our own practice experience of struggle, as well as skills of mastery and growth. We continually centered the theories, practices, and experiences of BIPOC-identified scholars and social workers and are continuing to work towards decolonizing our curriculum as we move forward.

Brie worked to differentiate her service and scholarship away from performative allyship to areas that directly impact her teaching and students (Kalina, 2020). She focused on targeted antiracism activities at her university by engaging regularly in an antiracism working group with other faculty, staff, and students to reinforce direct change for our environment by offering trainings, and she also supported others to integrate antiracism work into their teaching and scholarship. After a decade and a half in community mental health, she reached out to public health contacts to propose a partnership to focus on alternatives to calling the police about mental health crises. She also started decolonizing her curriculum by integrating in more decolonized theorists in all her courses (i.e., Loretta Ross, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis,

Dean Spade, Mariame Kaba, Bettina Love, Derald Wing Sue) and acknowledging the "white wall" of therapists and social workers (Stone & ChenFeng, 2021).

Another area Brie focused on was equity with students and mentorship. After learning about the dearth of research opportunities for undergraduate social work students, especially first generation and BIPOC-identifying students (Davidson, 2018), Brie decided to create more opportunities for her students. Brie put out an open call to any students in her classes interested in presenting and research, and she had four students participate in four different presentations and research projects, including an international conference about housing inequality and racism, as well as a gender justice conference regarding queer spaces during the pandemic; two students received funding for their ideas.

## Conclusion

As the pandemic and its aftermath are still ongoing, we will continue to engage in parallel process and anti-oppressive, trauma-informed educational pedagogy with our students as we head into the future. Our recent mixed-methods research study, which focused on the wellness and coping of students in the beginning of the pandemic, demonstrated how resilient social work students can be when faced with adversity (Deedat et al., in press). Surprisingly, despite the ongoing challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more BSW students applied to graduate school than in previous years to continue their social work education (Bradshaw, 2021).

There has been recent acknowledgement that faculty's mental health has also greatly suffered during this time, and engaging in a mixed-methods study around faculty coping and well-being could greatly benefit the field of helping professionals (Ao, 2020). For future research, we think it would be helpful to see how a study of mental well-being could be applied to faculty and staff to measure their stress responses before, during, and after the pandemic. How have the increased tensions around racial injustices or issues around the pandemic intensified; such issues might include health worries, loss of loved ones, unemployment, and the continued stress of working in a pandemic environment or running a virtual school at home? In accordance with the new social work code of ethics additions (NASW, 2021), we will encourage self-care as a core practice skill and ask students to integrate self-care into every class session (Grise-Owens, 2018). Furthermore, our university focused on supporting students but did not always acknowledge the stressors that faculty and staff had to face (Berger et al., 2021). This is another implication that was brought up through this reflection essay. While TIEP has been used in various settings in the last ten years, there is limited research on integrating anti-racist pedagogy into TIEP. We hope that more research is applied to both online/remote and in-person educational process.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a once-in-a-lifetime experience for us as educators and for our students (Berger et al., 2021). The gravity of the pandemic has been immeasurably elevated due to a long-standing, systemic disregard for Black lives in America, which generated an overdue response in the form of protests and other racial justice campaigns during the very nascent months of the pandemic. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice protests

are now appearing to recede, together they have altered the social, physical, psychological, economic, and political landscapes of American society to a certain degree. In response to these two ongoing events, we, as social work professors, and our students have had to adapt to the changing landscapes and unexpected ethical dilemmas personally and professionally without having to sacrifice the code of ethics of the social work profession. The safety-first, self-care, and anti-racist, trauma-informed techniques adopted and co-opted into our virtual classrooms allowed us to create safe spaces for our students and for ourselves, which helped our students and ourselves to process, make sense of, and deal with the dual pandemic while upholding the tenets of the social work profession. We believe that current and future educators—particularly social work professors—can take solace and encouragement from the various techniques that we utilized to confront and continue to live through the unprecedented times presented by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the systemic racial injustice in the United States.

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# Shifting Course: Drawing on Feminist Principles to Inform Community-Engaged Teaching in Uncertain Times

Amie Thurber, Sarah Suiter, and Susan Halverson

**Abstract:** This autoethnographic case study explores teaching community-engaged courses during the onset of COVID-19. As educators who teach applied program evaluation courses at two universities, we consider how principles of feminist community engagement—relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and disruptive pedagogy (Iverson & James, 2014)—ground our courses. Drawing from instructor reflections, interviews with community partners, students' written reflections, and course evaluations, we explore how these principles informed our pedagogical response to teaching through the tumultuous spring of 2020, and the degree to which these practices enabled the continued participation of students and community partners. We close with implications for community-engaged teaching in these—and all—times.

*Keywords*: community-engaged teaching, pedagogy, feminism, evaluation

## Introduction

After weeks of slow-building uncertainty as to if, when, and how COVID-19 would reach our communities, in-person instruction at many universities ceased with startling abruptness. In the spring of 2020, like thousands of our colleagues around the world, we found ourselves scrambling to move our in-person courses to an online, remote learning format within days, as we and everyone we knew stocked our homes ahead of stay-at-home orders; studied the rapidly emerging and shifting science of the disease; and juggled our particular constellations of children at home, laid-off family members, fears for vulnerable loved ones, and an overlying sense of dread. We waded through the flood of emails from our respective institutions detailing changing protocols and the flurry of academic blog posts and opinion articles circulating with instructional resources and online teaching tips. While many of the tools were invaluable (particularly to those of us new to remote and online teaching), most seemed to reduce the difficulties of the moment to technical challenge, minimizing the human impacts of teaching in a pandemic for educators and learners alike. Moreover, none provided a road map for our courses, which engaged both students and human service professionals in co-learning program evaluation.

As hundreds of thousands of residents of our states lost their jobs and faced threats of eviction and a public health crisis, could we—and *should* we—continue to ask some of the very community leaders charged with meeting the needs of vulnerable populations to participate in this course? As our students navigated unprecedented anxieties, fears, and disruptions, could we adequately support them in a demanding graduate experience that requires high levels of professionalism and initiative? How could we move forward in ways that were responsive and relevant to the needs of the community and to our students? To answer these questions, we turned to one another, as touchstones and sounding boards, and grounded in feminist principles to infuse our community-engaged teaching with concern for the human impacts of the pandemic.

## Feminist Approaches to Community-Engaged Teaching

As there is no singular feminism (Olesen, 2005), there is no uniform method of feminist community-engaged teaching (Dean et al., 2019). However, in their introduction to *Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis*, editors Iverson and James (2014) identify four themes to the book that may serve as anchoring principles of feminist community engagement: relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and disruptive pedagogy. As explored below, these principles can serve to address tensions and limitations in traditional approaches to community-engaged teaching.

### Centering Relationality

Courses that incorporate service to the community have been criticized for reinscribing problematic binaries of those who need help/who can help and deepening the othering and essentializing of communities that have long been marginalized (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Hui, 2009). Feminist approaches reject forms of community engagement that presuppose transactional relationships between those who are seen as needing help and those who are seen as helpers, and instead move toward relationships of reciprocity and accountability (Sheridan & Jacobi, 2014). Such relationships reflect an ethic of care (Held, 2006) where all parties of a helping interaction are both carers and cared-for and expect to be changed in the process (Meagher, 2004). In the context of community-engaged teaching and learning, attention to relationality requires students to hone the ethical and interpersonal skills needed to work in collaboration and in community (Warren et al., 2016). A commitment to relationality also involves structuring community-engaged projects to be dually accountable and responsive to both community partners' needs, timelines, and expectations (Thurber & Suiter, 2019) and students' learning goals—infusing a spirit of reciprocity to the work (Twill et al., 2011).

### Encouraging Border Crossing

Community-engaged teaching generally takes the form of a traditional academic course (and the requisite set of readings, assignments, and in-person instruction) augmented by student activities in the community. These activities are often framed as community service and occur on-site at a local organization. Feminist approaches to community engagement encourage border crossing by challenging the often-assumed boundaries that constrain where community engagement can occur, the forms of that engagement, and the roles played by community members, students, and instructors (Iverson & James, 2014). Whereas traditional community-engaged teaching imagines learning in the classroom and service in the community, feminist approaches integrate learning and community engagement in both academic and community spaces (Dean et al., 2019). Such approaches emphasize the multiple roles students, educators, and community members occupy, including those of learner, consultant, expert, and facilitator.

**Integrating Reflexivity**

Though the integration of action with reflection is posited as the defining characteristic of service learning (Twill et al., 2011), traditional service learning courses often offer insufficient opportunities for critical reflection, obscuring structural causes of inequality with a focus on meeting individual needs (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Hui, 2009). Feminist approaches to community engagement integrate reflexive practices. Social work scholar Jan Fook (2015) describes reflexivity as a process of critical reflection that "helps us make specific connections between ourselves as individuals and our broader social, cultural and structural environment" (p. 444). In reflecting on their preparation of community-engaged researchers, Warren et al. (2016) note: "Learning to narrate the stories of self—stories that articulate the deeply embedded values that shape our identities and purpose as researchers—is no easy feat" (p. 252). As Warren et al. (2016) conclude, such narration requires "being willing to be vulnerable to each other and to community partners in a way that is seldom taught" (p. 253). Like a muscle, reflexivity must be practiced so it can be strengthened; instructors can facilitate such development through formalized reflective processes as suggested by Fook, 2015, in-class writing, and discussion prompts.

**Utilizing Disruptive Pedagogy**

The structure and products of engagement can easily privilege the learning goals of the academy over the needs of the community (Sheridan & Jacobi, 2014; Stoecker et al., 2009). Feminist community engagement is pedagogically disruptive in that it unsettles traditional norms related to the purposes, processes, and forms of community-engaged teaching. As Iverson and James (2014) suggest, "community engagement must move beyond its charitable orientation to instead cultivate activist-oriented attitudes, knowledge, and skills" (p. 6). As such, an activist orientation reflects both a critical analysis of the root causes of social problems and a commitment to meaningful participation within social change efforts. Such an approach is attentive to the manifestations of power within society and the academy, and explicitly works to build power within social justice movements (Bisignani, 2014). Pedagogically disruptive approaches may inform the choice of community partnerships (for example, instructors may intentionally seek to collaborate with, and in doing so build the capacity of, organizations with a strong equity orientation) as well as the approach to teaching. Instructors encourage students to look to the community—in addition to the classroom—for expertise, and to evaluate the quality and significance of their contributions to their community partner—in addition to any work completed for class.

Importantly, adopting these principles of feminist community engagement—an emphasis on relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and disruptive pedagogy—does not ensure that community-engaged teaching/learning will be just, that outcomes will be meaningful or relevant, or that the work will be uncomplicated by the thorny interplays of power and privilege. As noted by Bergman and Montgomery (2017), "trust and responsibility are not guarantees that things will go well or that oppression and violence will not happen" (p. 163). Rather, these principles serve

as an invitation to engage in community-engaged teaching and learning that actively grapples with these complexities as part of our responsibility to ourselves, one another, and those with whom we seek to partner. As feminist educators who teach applied program evaluation courses at two universities, we take up that invitation to reflect on how these principles are reflected in our course designs as well as in our pedagogical response to teaching through the tumultuous spring of 2020.

## Context and Methods

This study centers on two community-engaged graduate courses in program evaluation taught at two universities while our communities were reeling from the effects of COVID-19, as well as nationwide uprisings following the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd. Given that the courses required—and sustained—a high level of investment from both students and community partners, our interest is in tracing the principles and practices that enabled this participation. The two courses use a shared design that brings representatives from four to seven local community organizations into a graduate-level course. Community partners that desire to build their program evaluation capacity apply to participate in the course; those that are selected attend at no cost. Through the course, community partners and students learn the principles of evaluation design and apply these principles in real time to meet organizational needs. Community partners have access to all course materials, though they are not expected to complete readings. Each week, students are assigned course content related to an aspect of evaluation design. In class, the instructor provides a brief synthesizing lecture to prepare students and their community partners to apply the week's content to their project. The majority of the class time is reserved for students to work in project-based teams with their organizational partner. Over the course of the term, each team develops a comprehensive evaluation plan for later implementation within the partner organization. The final plans include an evaluation rationale and design, a program logic model, a sampling plan, data collection tools and timelines, and plans for data analysis and dissemination (for a more comprehensive description of the course and outcomes, see Suiter et al., 2016).

Sarah Suiter developed the course at Vanderbilt University and has refined the 16-week curriculum over several years. In 2016, Amie Thurber served as a TA in the course. Following her move to Portland State University (PSU), Amie modified the curriculum to accommodate an 11-week quarter. In spring of 2020, Sarah taught the course for the seventh time at Vanderbilt with a class of 20 students and five community partners, and Amie, assisted by teaching assistant Susan Halverson, piloted the course at PSU with a smaller class of 12 students and four community partners. In mid-March, the pandemic brought in-person instruction to an end at both institutions. At the time, Sarah was halfway through the term, and Amie's quarter was two weeks from beginning. As such, though the authors, students, and community partners were similarly impacted by the spread of COVID-19, the effects on the teaching-learning experience varied. This differential impact was heightened by differences in the student populations. Though both courses enroll graduate students seeking careers in social welfare and social

change, Amie's students were more likely to be precariously housed, have increased at-home care responsibilities, and be otherwise directly affected by the pandemic.

Blending a multi-case study and autoethnographic approach (Ellis & Adams, 2014; Simons, 2014), this paper explores the practices that enabled students and community partners to continue engagement during a pandemic and considers the transferability of these practices to future teaching conditions. Instructor reflections serve as the primary data for this analysis, complemented by interviews with community partners and student written reflections and course evaluations. Collaborative reflection was ongoing as Amie and Sarah spoke before, during, and following the spring term about our respective plans, modifications, difficulties, and successes, and Amie and Susan worked closely together over the course of our 11-week term. To deepen our analysis, Amie and Sarah completed written reflections of our teaching experiences, which we later analyzed in a recorded and transcribed session in order to surface through-lines and points of distinction. In addition, Susan completed reflective interviews with community partners in the PSU course, and analyzed these transcripts, along with student course evaluations from both courses, looking for complementary and contrasting themes.

## Reflections

Using the four principles of feminist community engagement as an organizing heuristic, this paper presents findings from our analysis. We consider how relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and disruptive pedagogy are built into the course design, and how we leveraged these principles to adapt the courses and our instruction in the context of the pandemic.

### Heightened Relationality

Given that both courses are designed to engage students in an applied team-based project with a community partner, the courses require multiple layers of relational accountability for both students and instructors. Ideally, students endeavor to meet the evaluation needs of their community partner, while also tending to their individual learning goals, the goals and needs of their peers, and the course requirements. The instructors balance responsibility to students and community partners, working to support the learning needs of students while also ensuring accountability to community partners who expect to gain increased evaluation capacity and an actionable evaluation plan. The pandemic heightened the relational aspects of the course.

Sarah's course was well underway when the university moved to remote instruction, and Nashville was still recovering from a recent tornado. She recalls her student's concern about the strains these placed on their community partners: "Students felt a lot of anxiety around, okay, we just had this tornado, and now we have COVID, and nobody knows what's going on in the world, and…does this organization still need an evaluation plan?" Across the country, Amie was wondering the same thing as her class was two weeks from beginning. She reached out to each partner to reassess their capacity to participate in the course. In both contexts, all community partners recommitted to their participation. As Sarah reflects, "We did have that conversation

about, like, is this the best thing for your organization right now? We gave people that out, and people said, 'No, we need this. Now, more than ever.'" For these partners, the pandemic underscored the critical importance of understanding the impacts and limitations of their work so as to better advocate for additional support and to more clearly discern where to invest existing resources. Yet, reassessing capacity and recognizing that partner needs may have changed since the initial course application was an important and appreciated expression of relational accountability.

In Amie's course, it was equally important to also reassess the student's shifting capacity and needs. Before the term began, Amie sent students a brief survey regarding their access to a computer, reliable internet, a workspace, and to also identify other basic needs (food, shelter, medical, and mental health care). A quarter of the students expressed concern about being able to participate without disruption (primarily as a result of increased care responsibilities toward children and siblings). Several identified technology and connectivity limitations, and others raised concerns about meeting their basic needs. In completing the survey, a number of students expressed appreciation for this attention to their wellbeing, saying things like, "I sincerely appreciate you offering this question. I might need this resource in the future." As appropriate, Amie referred students to resources and, once in class, worked to normalize the complexity of the shift to remote teaching, learning, and working along with the increased stress caused by the pandemic.

**Navigating New Border Crossings**

The applied evaluation courses are designed to encourage border crossing. Unlike traditional service learning courses in which students go out of the classroom to engage the community, this course brings community members into the course. The course challenges binaries between the classroom and community, academic and applied work, students and teachers, novices and professionals. This disruption is intentional, and it is an important part of the graduate students' professional socialization. Students move from seeing themselves primarily as learners to applying their skills and knowledge and building an emerging professional identity (Weidman et al., 2001).

Simultaneously, there are clearly defined roles that support the overall success of the course: Each community partner's expertise is needed to ground the evaluation to the organization's needs; student's engagement with the course content is needed to develop a robust evaluation design; and the instructor's teaching and consultation is needed to ensure that all understand and can apply the guiding principles of evaluation design (American Evaluation Association, 2018).

The onset of COVID-19 pushed the border crossing dimensions of this course in new directions. Our professional interactions immediately became more personal as students, community partners, and instructors logged into class from their home spaces, with children, pets, siblings, and roommates moving in and out of earshot and view. These intimacies were at turns endearing and embarrassing, highlighting unexpected similarities and stark differences. Some logged into

class from spacious home offices and others from closets; some never had to worry about connectivity and others were constantly freezing on screen or kicked out of the video call. Amie recalls readmitting one student to Zoom to rejoin her team multiple times in a single class. The fifth time, the student appeared on screen flushed and teary-eyed, exasperated and also embarrassed, concerned that the constant technological challenges reflected poorly on her as an emerging professional.

The challenges of shifting to remote teaching and learning were not just technical. Sarah recalls how the shift altered the ways she takes in information about the students in the class as a whole while focusing attention on individual groups. Key features of course instruction such as pacing group work, noticing student frustration, and responding when groups get stuck suddenly required new cues as exemplified in Sarah's experience:

> One thing that I found the hardest about teaching online that I had never paid attention to before, is how much information I take in that is mostly unrelated to what people are saying—so noise level, you know, posture… energy…the things that are taken in intuitively.

Amie remembers a time when a student suddenly turned off their video in the midst of a somewhat heated conversation with their small group and community partner. At the time, Amie felt unsure how to interpret that decision without additional context: "Like, was it because something's happening in your house, or are you reacting to something that was said? ...And it's so hard to know what to do." While it is important for students to develop the professional skill of staying engaged in and working through difficult conversations, Amie realized, "I know this person also is sharing a house with three siblings and there's like, all these other things going on in the space, and she absolutely has the right to do that."

The increased stress of these new border crossings—struggling with new technologies, working from home while balancing care responsibilities—impeded some students' ability to cross other borders. Amie reflects, "I think it made it harder for students to feel like being risk-takers and lean into the discomfort, to embrace some of that discomfort of like, stepping out of being a student into being an emerging professional." While encouraging students to step into independent professional practice and view the instructor as a colleague and consultant, students demonstrated—through frequent emails, texts, and requests that the instructor join their team meetings—an increased reliance on the familiar role of instructor to provide reassurance that their work was progressing as expected.

Community partners also reported struggling with some of the same challenges experienced by students: boundaries between their work and home lives and between their work and class responsibilities. One community partner noted that their focus may have been greater had we met in the classroom: "I found it a bit harder to concentrate on, like, a lecture as well...when I'm in my living room. It's harder" (personal communication, August 19, 2020). Another community

partner reflected on the challenges of managing concurrent expectations of her agency work and her engagement in the course:

> I felt the most distracted during Amie's lectures, even though I found them all to be valuable. There were times that I was like, I actually have to respond to this email. It's more important than me absorbing this. It's hard to say, because I found it all valuable, um, but based on the hierarchy of needs, considering the pandemic, there were times that I was like, I actually have to pay attention to this right now. (personal communication, July 29, 2020)

Simultaneously, community partners found that holding sessions remotely allowed for greater accessibility. Every community partner interviewed reported that participation was easier without having to deal with transportation. One community partner said, "not having to commute to [campus] and park was really nice" (personal communication, July 13, 2020). Another community partner, who holds both a full-time job and leads another organization, expressed appreciation for the time-saving benefits of remote instruction. In addition to being able to schedule other meetings immediately before and after class, he recalled several times when he attended class late due to scheduling conflicts, which, had the class met in person, would have forced him to miss a full session.

**Deepened Reflexivity**

The courses are designed to engage students in ongoing practices of reflexivity, which link reflection and action related to the skills requisite to program evaluation. As students practice the "soft skills" of collaborative and consulting work each week, instructors encourage reflexivity through assigned self and peer reflections on the competencies needed to work effectively in groups. As students apply the "hard" or technical skills of evaluation design, instructors facilitate small and large group discussions regarding the ethical and practice challenges of the field. The pandemic expanded the range of topics about which both students and partners wanted and needed to be reflexive. As Sarah reflects:

> Whereas the conversations would have started with, "okay, what progress have you made on this in the last week…What did you learn from the reading," you know, it was more things like, "How are you doing? Are you holding things together today?" And so it sort of had to start at a more basic place, but also potentially a more important place.

Amie also worked to intentionally integrate more holistic reflexivity into the curriculum, turning the first thirty minutes of class into an optional time for peer support, without the community partners present. Students were invited to take turns sharing with and listening to one another in small groups, reflecting on any stresses or successes that surfaced that day. Students frequently commented that this time helped them feel more grounded and ready to engage in class, and also more attuned to their peers. As one student reflected in their course evaluation, "It helped me

build compassion to hear how [my teammates] were both struggling and talk openly about what each person was capable of bringing to the table and what additional supports everyone needed."

The importance of reflexivity was also highlighted for the instructors during this time. The loss of visual and auditory cues typically available in-person made it all the more important to critically reflect on where students and community partners seemed to be learning and struggling, to engage in more frequent checks for understanding, and to process difficulties with colleagues. Amie recalls the value of having a TA, even in a small course, to help circulate between team breakout groups and debrief observations: "Those conversations really helped me to see that there were additional needs that, had I not had the chance to debrief each week, I don't know that I would have been aware of…I would have just sort of marched ahead with what I saw."

In retrospect, we realize that the spaces for reflexivity—such as assigned written reflections and peer support spaces, and weekly debriefs between instructor and TA—were designed primarily for students and instructors. We did not consider the potential value of reflexive activities for community partners. This may have been useful in processing their own experiences, and, if integrated with students, offered helpful insights in how both students and community partners were experiencing and navigating this particularly challenging time.

**Strategically Disruptive Pedagogy**

The courses embody disruptive pedagogy in a number of ways. Instructors recruit community partners who are engaged in local social justice work, and the primary course deliverable—a tailored evaluation plan—is designed to be highly relevant to and actionable for these organizations. The community partners serve as experts regarding the needs of their community and organization, while the students and instructors commit to helping the partners effectively assess and communicate the impact of their work. The course is strongly scaffolded by curriculum and in-class activities that support students through each stage of crafting an evaluation plan. At the same time, the course requires a high level of initiative within each group, enabling students to "practice" being professional consultants to their partner.

The upheaval caused by the pandemic caused instructors to reassess what content and assignments were most relevant to students and community partners. For example, in the first week of online classes, Sarah decided to drop an assigned paper on cost analysis: "It's something that I want students to be familiar with, but it's also unlikely that they're going to do cost studies…that's just outside of the skill set of most people." Mindful of the increased stress students were experiencing, instructors made real-time adjustments to readings and assignments to both lighten the load and preserve the most critical aspects of the course.

Attempts to reduce student stress also resulted in pedagogical shifts. Amie quickly realized that her students needed more support than anticipated with the process of writing an evaluation plan. The TA migrated the evaluation plan components outlined in the assignment description into a

Google Doc template for each team. As teams worked through sections of the template (for example, completing a logic model for the program under evaluation one week and outlining the evaluation goals and design another), they invited the instructor to provide feedback on their work. Amie recalls how this transformed relationships and learning in the course:

> The biggest shift is I really became a member of each team…I was like, commenting, adding, you know, editing, making recommendations, much more so than I would be generally. And yet I think in the end, students felt very proud of the work they'd done, and felt like it was their own, and like they got to see a version of their work that was more polished than they'd ever seen before. I hadn't planned on providing that level of engagement, but it was like disrupting the assumption that they have to do it themselves.

While it is atypical for an instructor to be a co-author on students' assignments, in the context of the applied evaluation course, this level of collaboration was an important form of professional mentoring. Moreover, it modeled the continued collaboration and learning that practitioners can expect in the field: We learn from one another and make each other's work better. As reflected in this evaluation comment, students appreciated this hands-on approach:

> I liked that we had the opportunity to continuously ask questions and seek support because the majority of us were learning to engage in this content for the first time as consultors. [The instructor] did a great job at supporting every group…and would even meet with us on Saturdays to go over the evaluation plan and make edits where needed.

In this case, the instructor's engagement in the writing process also ensured that community partners received a robust, well-written evaluation plan.

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, students and community partners overwhelmingly expressed high levels of appreciation for their experiences in the course. One student wrote in their course evaluation, "I had no idea that I was going to literally fall in love with evaluation and make a commitment to use evaluative processes in all of my work going forward." A community partner reported, "I really felt like having that evaluation designed for us was, it was like a Christmas gift or something. It was so awesome that we had these students." When asked what they would say to a potential community partner regarding the class, all of the partners said that they would encourage others to participate.

## Discussion

Teaching a course rooted in feminist principles of community engagement during the onset of a global pandemic underscored the function and value of feminist modes of engagement, in these and all times. Although attention to relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and a commitment to utilizing a disruptive pedagogy were already reflected in our course design, when the

COVID-19 pandemic forced the transition to remote instruction, these principles helped instructors further adapt the courses to support the continued engagement of students and community partners, and also to notice where meaningful engagement was challenged.

Attention to the emerging and shifting needs of students and community partners during this particular crisis underscored the importance of relationality and engaging all participants in continually reassessing what is needed for the partnership to be successful. We are reminded that the heart of community-engaged teaching is an ethic of care (Held, 2006) for students and community partners, anchored in a spirit of reciprocity. Navigating new technologies that were unevenly accessible within our learning communities, and the intimacies of "working together" while surrounded by the sights and sounds of our home-spaces, encouraged us to reimagine and expand our awareness of the border crossings inherent in community-engaged teaching. It also left unanswered questions about how to bridge the gaps created in the absence of in-person social cues and interaction, and how best to develop professional communication and collaboration skills in online spaces. As students and community partners grappled with personal challenges through the pandemic, we witnessed the critical value of spaces for reflexivity, and the difficulties in expressing vulnerabilities with one another, alongside gaining technical knowledge and skills. Teaching through the pandemic pushed us to recommit to a disruptive pedagogy through reassessing both content and teaching practices in order to reduce student stress and support development, while preserving the integrity of the course goals.

There is no doubt that things were lost in the switch to remote instruction; we missed the opportunities to build relationships with students and community partners through informal interactions before and after class, the feeling of being in a room buzzing with generative energy, and the ability to monitor and interact with multiple groups in real time. Though students and community partners agreed that the course was a success, most would concede that the amount of learning was diluted by the stress of the time and the switch to online teaching and learning. Yet, alongside these losses, many of the adaptations and accommodations made in the context of the pandemic also produced gains in accessibility for community partners, and more fully supported student learning. As a result, this case study offers a number of implications for this and other community-engaged courses, when such accommodations may be optional rather than required.

First, while designed as an in-person class, our experience demonstrated that these courses can be modified to a fully remote environment and still provide a robust graduate experience and be of value to community partners. As noted, this has particular implications for community partners. The option to participate in the class remotely may increase accessibility to local partners concerned about the impact of travel time, and enable the participation of partners in distant locations, or those who do not feel comfortable coming to campus. The possibilities of remote instruction raise a number of additional questions for instructors: Could we invite partners to participate remotely, even if students are meeting in person? Could the class also work as an online course, with some synchronous group activity? There are certainly logistical difficulties to think through and, given that we will be experimenting with both these approaches

in the months ahead, we will continue to consider how we can reimagine the course design while preserving the desired learning objectives and outcomes for students and community partners alike.

Second, while the course design initially called for student's primary written work—the final evaluation plan for their partner agency—to be completed in teams and evaluated by the instructor, we see great potential in a mentoring model of student writing. This approach may have particular relevance in courses meant to bridge emerging practitioners from their role as students into practice. Given the increased time required to support and scaffold students in both learning program evaluation and gaining competence in technical writing, we find great value in having a TA in the course. We also wonder about the possibility of distributing the mentoring load by cross-listing the course in PhD programs and assigning a doctoral student (or students) to each group. These students can simultaneously increase their own program evaluation competence while learning to mentor others in acquiring and applying these skills.

Ultimately, we are reminded that despite our own desire for structure in uncertain times, feminist principles of community engagement are best reflected in emergent practices rather than fixed protocols. At the beginning of the pandemic—and even in other, less extreme, uncertain territories—it was, and is, natural to want a map to help us navigate. Maps let us know where we are, where we are going, and the various routes that might help us arrive. Maps also require a known (to someone) and documented terrain, which was not presented this spring. We needed a different tool to help us navigate, and found in the feminist principles of relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and disruptive pedagogy a *compass*—adept at guiding us in anchoring directions even when the path from here to there was uncharted.

## Acknowledgements

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

Annette Grape, Margaret Lane, and Leanne Walters

**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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# 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.

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# Pandemic Teaching

Monica Leisey

**Abstract:** The 2020-2021 academic year was one like no other in the history of the US higher education system. After a rapid, unplanned shift from mostly in-person teaching, teaching remotely with technology became the norm. This is the story of how I, an associate professor, learned how to teach remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Keywords***:** student engagement, instructor vulnerability, post-pandemic teaching, online teaching

I was supposed to be on sabbatical the 2019-2020 academic year. While the fall was spent focused on my research, the spring found me serving the university in an administrative role. While I learned quite a bit about academic leadership and the complexities of responding to a pandemic, what I didn't experience in the spring of 2020 was the required, instantaneous shift to remote learning. As I transitioned out of the administrative role in June, I was faced with the realization that, just like everyone else, I was going to be teaching from home for at least the next semester or two. I panicked—I had no idea how I was going to manage remote teaching.

I am an associate professor of social work at a mid-sized regional state university with a large percentage of first generation and Pell grant students. We believe that we are a *teaching* university, prioritizing teaching over research even for our most senior faculty members. Prior to the pandemic, I had been an okay teacher, receiving average to above average class evaluations. I had taught a few hybrid courses, but I had never taught a completely online course. Even though I had taken a course on how to teach a hybrid course, I never actually felt that the hybrid courses I taught went particularly well.

Students, I was sure, do not want to take online courses. Based on the past, albeit anecdotal, feedback from students, our faculty were sure that online courses were not appropriate for, nor wanted by, our social work students. Additionally, I was convinced that social work should not be taught online. Social work, we know, is about relationships. How was I going to create those requisite relationships and experiences through a computer screen? I admit I panicked a little thinking about how I was going to manage the shift to remote teaching. What was I going to do?

Like any good scholar, I began by scouring the literature and the internet about how to teach online. I spent the summer of 2020 reading everything I could about how to build community online. I read countless articles, listened to every podcast I could find on the subject, and signed up for as many teaching tips newsletters as I could. In short, I did my homework. I didn't do it alone. My university hired instructional designers and began faculty learning communities to help us think about and implement this new way of teaching. I collected everything I could find that would help me put together a plan. And plan, I did.

At first, I focused on the technology. I explored the options on the e-learning platform available to me, learned about the many options within Zoom, integrated the many software programs I had so that they kept each other up-to-date, and even talked with my daughter and a friend, both of whom are in graduate programs, about what technological strategies worked for them. While they did share some technology-focused thoughts, I had forgotten that I knew most of what these grad students told me. I knew about building professional relationships that promoted curiosity and engagement.

As Darby and Lang (2019) note, good teaching is good teaching. What was needed online is very similar to what is needed in the classroom; you just have to figure out new ways to make it happen. I believe that all education is relationship based, so I did need to figure out how to build those relationships through a screen. More importantly, though, I needed to think through what the consequences of the pandemic were for my students. This wasn't just about being remote; it was about the "why" of being remote.

Once I got past the idea that I needed to become a tech-wiz to teach online, I revisited the material that I had read to see what the authors said beyond the available technological answers. What I began to realize was that because of the pandemic, being my most empathetic, understanding self might be the most important dimension of teaching needed, even while we were doing the teaching and learning through a screen.

I began by focusing on the desired takeaways of the course and making sure that everything planned in the course—readings, homework, and assignment rubrics—focused specifically on those goals. Given what I had read about the complexity and difficulty of learning at home during the pandemic, it seemed important to not include unnecessary work. The second important characteristic that seemed important to include was built-in flexibility. I decided to no longer have required due dates for most of the assignments. Instead, I had suggested due dates with the understanding that I would accept assignments up until the very last class. I knew that this could be problematic, especially if it left me with an unreasonable amount of work at the end of the semester, but I decided to take the risk in order to balance the students' burdens.

The last piece of course structure that I attended to was the actual course assignments. Previously, I had followed the traditional assignment structures that I had experienced as a student and that I had seen other faculty members use—traditional, formal, academic papers. I thought about the importance of this assignment format for the courses I was teaching. Were these types of assignments the best way for students to demonstrate to me that they understood and were able to integrate and synthesize the ideas? For all but one assignment, I removed the required academic paper and provided assignment options that I felt confident I would be able to evaluate.

I then turned my attention to how to build the requisite relationships needed for learning to happen. I realized that there are really two different types of relationships that are important in a classroom: those between the students and the instructor and those between the students. How

would I prompt and then support those relationships? I started by thinking about what I had control over and what was required for the course.

Returning to the course assignments, I included more group work that could be done asynchronously but required students to work together. For instance, in one course I required a group project that consisted of three to four students discussing a closing question posed by the authors of the textbook and providing to me their answer or answers. The group did have to share with me evidence of their discussion: either a recording if they were doing the discussion synchronously, or a copy of the texts or emails used if they were doing the discussion asynchronously. I also revisited the course plan and made sure that I was including plenty of opportunity for small group chats, breakout rooms, and discussions via the e-learning discussion board.

Reviewing all that I had done, I realized that I had missed probably the most important aspect of the teaching/learning relationship—that between an instructor and the individual student. What was I to do? I knew that this couldn't be " required" in a course or created via course structure. I had to admit that, to do this well, I was going to have to show up in all the ways that were going to matter to each student. I began a list of the behaviors that I thought would help; I then committed myself to doing these throughout the semester.

In order to get to know each student, I decided to begin each session with a check-in. Our check-ins began with one's name and pronouns (if comfortable sharing) followed by my check-in question. To make it fun, I came up with a list of questions, asking things like what your personal weather forecast is today, and why (if you feel like sharing). I also decided to offer optional drop-in sessions for students who had additional questions that we couldn't get to during the shorter online class session time, or who had questions about the homework or reading that they wanted to explore outside of class. Additionally, for those courses that were designed to be asynchronous, I recorded a video each week to cover the important aspects of the reading material.

I also committed to reaching out to any student for whom I have concerns. In the past, I was not this proactive, believing that students have the responsibility and the right to make decisions about how they move through a course and a semester. For instance, I did not accept many late assignments due to my presumption that the assignment had not been completed due to poor choices. Under the present circumstances, I realized, it may not be a choice at all, but a consequence of the pandemic. Another possible consequence of the pandemic learning experience, I thought, could be the need for more prompt, holistic feedback. While in the past I would provide some feedback, I also required students to meet with me if they didn't understand my notes within their assignments. I decided that might not work right now, so my feedback has become more robust including that which is good, that which could have been improved, and that which missed the mark.

Lastly, I vowed to be present. In the " before times," showing up included dressing professionally, being prepared with the class session lecture, and staying on top of grading assignments. This year, it was going to look differently and, I suspected, I would need to show up differently. I decided to show up as my most authentic self. Being transparent about my concerns for the semester and my fear about teaching in a new format. Being explicit about the need to have student engagement for the course to work and of my struggle to read the room remotely. Most importantly, I was going show up empathetically, understanding that these circumstances are not what we had planned for or expected. I would show up expecting students to be doing the best they can under extraordinary circumstances and be sure to explicitly recognize and support that.

Even as I wrote my opening remarks, which included my concerns and fears for the semester, I was discouraged. I was afraid that the semester would result in less student engagement, feeling disconnected and more isolated than when we began the semester. Usually the optimist, my fear had gotten the better of me. As the semester began, I promised myself that I would simply do the best I could and see what happened.

What happened surprised me. All the planning and learning that I had done over the summer seemed to pay off. The weekly check-in question process took quite a bit of time, yet it became an important ritual for each class, providing opportunities for students to learn about their classmates and to share a bit about themselves. I also heard that students would follow up on these conversations outside of class which resulted in relationships being formed, albeit from a distance.

Students were engaged in class and out of class. Even via Zoom, there was a qualitative change in the engagement I experienced. I don't know if it was a result of students not being able to hide in a Zoom call, if it was because we were all the same size on screen, or if it was because I no longer felt like I was onstage, expected to be the expert. Something was different. Students talked to each other as much as they talked with me. Individual work and class preparation became more obvious, and there was an increased sense of rigor in the conversations. This may have been the result of clarity of purpose, with the course more clearly focused on just a few important concepts/ideas. Or it could have been the resulting democratization of everyone being the same size on the screen.

Discussion boards became more than just posting one's thoughts and then simply agreeing with what another student posted. There were actual back-and-forth discussions among students. The drop-in sessions were slow to get started, but as the semester progressed, more students made an effort to attend. We often veered away from course topics in our discussion, ending up with rich, rewarding discussions that used to happen before and after each in-person class. As the semester came to an end, I was pleasantly surprised by the notes of thanks and the number of students who registered to be in class with me again for the spring semester.

Looking back on the semester-and-a-half that I have taught online, I am struck by the importance of connection and engagement in the teaching/learning process regardless of modality. I am also more aware then ever of the various ways that one can create space for or manifest those characteristics, always taking into account the context within which one is teaching. Minimizing ancillary to-dos while amplifying and prioritizing content has been an important reminder for me. And, while the pandemic will result in major changes for higher education, it has also reminded us of the importance of interdependence.

As we recognize the possibility of future pandemics, it will be important to know the differences in technological availability and access to technology throughout the country. No longer a privilege, high-speed internet access is a necessity, especially as we attempt to provide higher education resources that do not have disproportionate outcomes. Additionally, it is important to know empirically what strategies worked for the many different types of higher education classes that exist and the resources needed to make those strategies work.

As of this writing, we are now halfway through our second full semester providing courses remotely, and we have been told that we may be able to return to our classrooms for the fall 2021 semester. I am excited about the prospect of being back on campus with my colleagues and hope to meet in person the students with whom I have been in classes. Reflecting on this experience has me wondering about the modality within which I do my best teaching. This is certainly not what I expected.

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# Invisible Transformations

## Pari Shah

This piece is inspired by my experiences of being a human *first* and a social worker *second* during a global pandemic. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic struck each and every one of our lives, and it brought about an abundance of grief, profound isolation, and a call to action to create change in our broken world. As a social worker, I juggle many identities: doctoral student, adjunct instructor, and therapist. Similarly, in my personal life, I am a partner, sister, daughter, and community member. Through a personal loss in my "chosen" family this past year, I learned that the most important role I carry is *being human*. My chosen family is a group of four families who have molded into one extended family, one in which we have always practiced collective care for one another. Our loss reminded me how persistent and all-consuming grief can be, and that I, as a person in the helping profession, must ground myself in caring for the humanness within myself.

When we care for others, we often lose sight of how to care for ourselves. This past year has forced many of us to open our homes to our work while simultaneously experiencing life as we knew it from the sacred place which we call "home". While all our boundaries were broken, we spent this past year transforming our homes into dynamic spaces, one of the biggest challenges I have ever encountered. All change is not visible; it is the invisible transformations, or the transformations that occur within our imagination, that are the utmost powerful. We used the power of imagination to turn bedrooms into classrooms, kitchen counters into conference rooms, and couches into therapy chairs. We did all of this with a deep grief in our hearts, and I hope that this poem serves as a reminder to you that, as you endure these continuous invisible transformations, I *see* you.

# Invisible Transformations

Pours hot coffee.
Commences commute to work
Upon the lengths of her 12-stair highway.
*Unmutes*

The pandemic shut the doors to my therapy practice
Yet opened the window to boundless connections.
Telemedicine, they said, would be the future
But why did no one say, teleconnection, would be all we have?

Sessions no longer are held in shared space
Rather sessions are carried through the wavelengths between me and you.
Rapport is built upon internet connection
Bandwidth breaks our boundaries.

The screen before me is a direct portal to you
But why do you feel so out of reach?
The therapy continues
While the world stops.

As the therapist, the eyes looking back at me see my office space.
As the therapist, I only see my bedroom.
At the end of a session, our work is paused
As quick as the click of a mouse.

My invisible transformation ensues
And my commute takes only the speed of light.
Now, I am the client
Peering into my therapist's bedroom.

They did not tell me that grief would not get easier
Even when I became a grief therapist.
Tears still strike me when I work from home
At least now, I can turn off my camera and cry.

Losing a loved one
To mental illness,
Makes me feel like I failed
Since I am a therapist.

Another invisible transformation occurs.
As the instructor, students look back at me and see their classroom
As the instructor, I see my bedroom.
Who knew knowledge could ride wavelengths too?

Being an online instructor gave me superpowers
Teleporting from [breakout] room to [breakout] room.
Making lessons appear out of thin air onto screens around the world.
What superpower will make us feel connected again?

Once again, the invisible transformation arrives
As I am now the student.
I peer into my instructor's bedroom
And their superpowers weave our connectedness.

There is beauty and tragedy in invisible transformations.
My chair has become a pew at my childhood neighbor's wedding.
My desk has become the podium at my chosen little brother's funeral.
How can one place be everything?

Well, because there's a magic in invisible transformations.
*Mutes*

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# Finding Belongingness Through Community in the First Year of COVID-19

Candace Hastings and Catherine Hawkins

**Abstract:** March 2020 to March 2021 marked the first year of COVID-19. Here, two faculty members—one an administrator, the other a social work professor—at a large public university in Texas reflect upon our journey and offer a narrative of how we navigated the pandemic. Our separate paths crossed, and ultimately converged, through the Office of Faculty Development. One year later, in retrospect, we realize that our story is a shared one of reconnecting on both the institutional and individual levels. We each sought and found, through distinct roles and different routes, a supportive community and sense of belonging. This helped us to survive and eventually to thrive despite the challenges, changes, and choices COVID-19 posed. Since development is an ongoing process, we end with how our story continues.

*Keywords***:** faculty development, personal development, reflections

## Introduction

COVID-19 disrupted and upended faculty work at universities and colleges abruptly in March 2020. In an April 2020 survey of United States college and university administrators and faculty (N=897), 56 percent of faculty respondents reported using new teaching methods, and 93 percent made at least one modification to course expectations, such as eliminating assignments or redesigning grading schema (Johnson et al., 2020). In addition to rapid course redesign, faculty were also called on to provide empathetic support for students in distress. Cordaro (2020) posits faculty who provided emotional support for students and colleagues were at an increased risk for compassion fatigue during COVID-19.

Faculty development offices were called upon to provide support for faculty members who had to hard-pivot their courses online. In addition, many faculty developers went beyond providing support for online teaching and learning. Bessette and McGowan (2020) speak to the role faculty developers played in supporting faculty during the pandemic, observing that affective skills such as compassion and empathy were crucial to providing needed support to faculty. Many faculty development programs served as hubs and communities, enabling faculty to connect on a professional and personal level. Communities of practice are sustained by the commitment, passion, and expertise of their members (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). In addition, they can be a vehicle for both professional and personal connection.

What follows is our story. We present our narratives as separate views of the same points in time. As our stories intertwine, the narrative provides a multi-layered view of how we navigated our professional lives during COVID-19 and how we found supportive communities through faculty development.

**Mid-March-May 2020**

*Catherine*

It happened just before 6 p.m. on Friday the 13th of March 2020, the day before spring break started. The hallway was largely deserted with only a few faculty members still working. I liked to stay late on Friday evening, since I enjoyed this quiet time at the end of the week. It was reinforcing to complete accumulated tasks that remained undone and to feel (sort of) caught up, and this week was no different. The semester was going well, and I looked forward to a relaxing break.

I remember seeing it as I was sitting in stunned disbelief, staring out of my office window, and wondering what I was going to do. I had not anticipated anything so drastic, and I was completely unprepared. It was still very early in the pandemic, and although the news was evolving rapidly and alarmingly, this email was far more unsettling. I turned back to my computer and read the memo from the provost again. Spring break would be extended by one week so all faculty could transition their courses to a remote synchronous format. I had absolutely no idea how to do this, and a very limited amount of time to figure it out.

Shortly after reading the email, I decided to walk down the hall to the workroom, just to engage in some momentary denial. I ran into a younger faculty member who had taught online previously; she asked if I had seen the email and inquired about my reaction. We chatted a bit, my mind in a whirl, and she offered to help me get started over spring break via Zoom. I had only ever used Zoom before to set up an occasional meeting, and I could not fathom teaching that way. Regardless, my colleague was reassuring, and I felt some slight relief from my overall sense of impending doom.

My school has been delivering a fully accredited, asynchronous, online graduate degree program for over two decades. Teaching online was optional, and I had always avoided it since I could not imagine that it was a good fit with my skills. I had heard from some faculty about negative experiences, which made it even less appealing. I already actively used Tracs, our current learning management system (LMS), as the platform for my in-person classes. I had attended training for online teaching and been certified by the university, but this was only to be better informed. At this point, I did not even fully realize that remote synchronous teaching was distinct from online asynchronous teaching. I did not understand how my computer would be the virtual classroom, or how Zoom would be my personal interface with students. That was yet to be experienced. Now, I was confronting the unanticipated consequences of my long-standing avoidance.

Adding to this distress, I had already been feeling detached from the school for various reasons, unmoored from my usual sense of belonging. This was an exceedingly odd state for me, as I had worked at the university for thirty years and always felt strongly connected. I had spent the past four years in a half-time university-level position as director of faculty development (FD), which

was a richly rewarding role. I had an office in the administrative building and reported directly to the associate provost, and I had gained a broad view of higher education, the university, and faculty relations. I met and engaged daily with faculty from across campus through implementing programs to support their career success.

Although I achieved a workable balance with my two roles, I stepped down as director during summer 2019. The position was being converted to full-time administration, which did not match my talents or goals. I returned as a full-time professor to the school that fall semester. I had contributed to the search for the new FD director, Candace Hastings, and I was excited to welcome her to campus. I chaired the newly formed FD advisory committee (FDAC), which allowed me to stay somewhat involved. The FDAC met periodically, and members were invited to participate in several ongoing FD programs. This service filled a bit of the void in the net of collegial connections that I had enjoyed as director and now sorely missed.

During the 2019-2020 academic year, the director of the school proposed that, in addition to teaching, I provide some faculty development for our non-tenure-line faculty in support of limited scholarly activities. While this was not required as part of the faculty job description, it had the potential of advancing their individual career goals. This was a generous offer that had the potential of helping me to also find my new place and purpose in the school. I was grateful for this opportunity since it gave me a chance to continue engaging in meaningful mentoring. After much exploration, a few faculty members identified promising projects to pursue. Despite this positive note, I still felt the absence of FD and my campus-wide engagement. The school had undergone significant changes during my part-time absence, and my transition back was unexpectedly rough.

The academic year presented other professional challenges that further contributed to my growing sense of displacement. Following a particularly jarring incident in a committee meeting at the school in early March, I realized that I should seek support elsewhere and fast. I was adrift and needed help. A spontaneous yet fortuitous encounter with Candace while walking across campus (how soon that would no longer be possible) was instrumental in assisting me to articulate my dilemma. Candace was empathetic and shared some of her own history that helped me to see a bigger perspective. Along with the support of a few trusted friends who understood academia, I endeavored to keep my bearing. Little did I know how quickly things would change further and get much worse.

Following spring break, the rest of the spring 2020 semester went by in a blur that I barely remember. The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, abrupt pivot to remote teaching, struggles with technology, and quarantine at home exacerbated my sense of displacement and isolation. Like so many others, this crisis forced me into survival mode: focusing on the work, learning Zoom and other techno tricks, teaching my classes synchronously, supporting my students in their own distress, and finishing the semester intact. After wrapping up some school committee duties by the end of May, I looked forward to a recuperative summer break.

## *Candace*

During the week of March 9, there had been talk of the state and university's response to the increase in COVID-19 cases in Texas. On March 9, we received an email from the provost advising faculty and departments to develop a 30-day remote teaching contingency. Our university is known for its culture of care. We love our beautiful campus. I was only six months into the job, but I had already fallen in love with crossing the spring-fed river that runs through our university to go to lunchtime yoga, and having sidewalk conversations with colleagues, including Catherine. Engaging with students and each other face-to-face has always been the hallmark of our being.

On March 13, our university president announced that our university was going immediately to remote learning until April 13 due to the spread of COVID-19. Spring break was extended one week to allow faculty two weeks to move their classes online for remote teaching. That day, I took a colleague to lunch to celebrate her first week on the job. It was a beautiful day to eat outside; however, even in the span of that one week, I had become more self-conscious about navigating spaces and people as COVID-19 started to permeate my life. COVID-19 was a cloud above my head on this bright sunny day when I should have been enjoying lunch and good conversation.

Later that day, the associate provost came to my office to explain the remote teaching plan. She said, "I know you have a background in teaching and learning. Faculty will need help in moving to remote teaching. *How can you help?*" My job to that point had been developing long-range faculty support programs, not rapid-fire solutions to teaching crises. Within an hour, I sent her a list of six workshops to be included in an email from the provost outlining training opportunities. The phrase "How can you help?" became my mantra for a year. Those words gave me the courage and strength I would need to do what was to come.

I delivered a total of 16 workshops in those next two weeks. Fortunately, I was an experienced online instructor and had spent a good portion of my career consulting and advising faculty how to teach online. But moving a face-to-face class online in a matter of a week or two? Even experienced faculty were scrambling. During the workshops, faculty were anxious, but they also showed tremendous commitment and energy. We were fueled by adrenaline and hope. After all, this was only supposed to be a temporary move. Surely, we could do anything for a few weeks! We were blissfully naïve. Looking back, I am not sure we would have even wanted to know that this would be the beginning of a long, hard ride for all of us.

The role of FD changed dramatically from that point on. But the mantra "How can I help?"—or, "How can *we* help?"—guided our decision-making and priorities. We pivoted quickly into new roles and tried to answer that question every day. The FD administrative assistant is a technical genius and a voracious learner. If there was something she did not know how to do, she figured it out. She explored all the ins and outs of Zoom. She even made handouts for faculty. We were a small but mighty team; every day we had new challenges thrown our way, but we tackled them

one by one.

Many universities have teaching and learning centers with multiple full-time staff members. At our university, we do not have a teaching and learning center. In fact, before my arrival, Catherine had served as the director of FD in a part-time appointment.

Luckily, FD was not alone in its efforts. Distance Learning, IT, and FD shared training responsibilities. Before this time, our units rarely interacted. Immediately we compiled resources and made presentations together. We talked daily, strategizing about meeting needs and coordinating our efforts. We leaned on each other. We were punch-drunk tired and laughed to keep from crying. We forged healthy partnerships and friendships. I will always treasure my colleagues in the trenches during COVID-19. We were the caregivers, taking care of each other.

Surprisingly, I did not feel overwhelmed. Rather, I finally felt like I had a purpose. In tough times, I am much more of a Martha than a Mary, to use a biblical reference. Staying busy doing purposeful work kept me afloat. It kept my own demons at bay. I worked long hours and tried not to think of much of anything at all. I came home every day, took my dog for a run through campus, and worked in the garden—anything to quiet my mind and gather strength for the next day, as each evening became a little lonelier.

I would like to say that I was answering the question of how I could help when we developed our first learning communities, but it was also to quell my own longing to belong. We called them "learning" communities, but they were born out of the sense of abrupt isolation many of us felt during those first weeks of remote teaching. Our associate provost put me in touch with a professor who had reached out to her, asking how she could be helpful. We connected immediately and started shaping our faculty community. More importantly, we became dear friends.

Every Friday during the lunch hour, faculty met for "Let's Do Lunch!" (LDL). We focused on remote teaching strategies, with the goal of creating a community of care online. We shared our successes and our "bloopers" with pride. For instance, an Italian instructor was "Zoom-bombed" on the very first day of remote instruction. A random man dropped into her class, hidden in the shadows, slowly smoking a cigarette. To hear her tell the story was priceless—we were laughing to the point of tears. Our meetings also featured games such as "pandemic bingo," where the top prize was a six-pack of toilet paper rolls, delivered personally to the winner's front porch. Each week, we tried to anticipate what was on the hearts and minds of our faculty, and this created time and space for us to support each other.

By sharing stories in our community of care, we forged resilience within ourselves and gained trust in each other. Later, as the pandemic spread, the community only grew stronger as situations grew more dire, as we were stretched and challenged in ways we never thought possible. We were able to see each other in our humanness. Some faculty had children running around in the background in Zoom. Some were working out of their kitchens. We were all trying

to figure out how to make things work, and LDL meant come as you are, whenever you can, wherever you are.

That spring I was also concerned about the disruption of research and writing that faculty had experienced, so I started a weekly Zoom faculty writing group called "Write Watchers." Many of the Write Watchers group members were juggling childcare or eldercare while trying to keep a handle on their scholarly lives from home. In Write Watchers, the first few minutes were spent connecting, settling in, and setting goals. Then we turned off our mics and cameras and wrote, alone, yet together. At the end of our time, we talked about successes and challenges, because Write Watchers was not just space to write. It was a source of support. When we faced rejections, or days we just simply could take no more, we shared strategies and encouraged each other to keep moving in a trusted and sacred space.

**Summer 2020**

*Catherine*

While the transition to remote teaching in spring had been daunting, like everyone else, I made a successful switch to the "new normal." My classes had gone well; I overcame my initial anxiety, expanded my skills, and gained confidence with this unfamiliar format. I was relieved that I would never have to teach this way again. I was hardly aware that the pandemic was just getting started. I adjusted to the solitude of working at home, and I came to appreciate the flexibility that it provided. Summer was here! I felt such a huge relief. I would have a hiatus for the first time in 27 years and I could just collapse.

Yet that is not what happened. The murder of George Floyd on Memorial Day (May 25) ignited national protests over racial inequality and calls for police reform. While I assumed that the university might come together in some collective action, things went in a different direction. My instinct was to contact several trusted colleagues and to speak honestly about my concerns over this crisis. Their wise counsel was invaluable in helping me to pursue my own self-directed, goal-oriented, and future-focused perspective. Candace reminded me of LDL, a learning community that FD had initiated in March, after the "switch." I was not able to attend LDL sessions in the spring due to my schedule, so now I joined; the group lived up to its FD description by Candace as a place for "continuity, connection, and compassion." Along with the support of a few trusted friends, I maintained my equilibrium, although I was stuck in a lonely place and still felt on shaky ground.

A few weeks later, on June 16, then-President Trump issued an executive order on policing that explicitly mentioned including social workers in responses involving mental health, homelessness, and addiction. While I did not share his politics, it spurred the social worker in me to engage in productive activity to pursue real solutions to these pressing issues. I reached out to like-minded faculty colleagues in my school and the School of Criminal Justice, as well as a community advocate. We established the Police Social Work Group (PSWG) to explore this

approach at the national, state, and local levels through education, policy, and research. This proved to be a collegial, thoughtful, and respectful group that provided me with another supportive community. I was reminded yet again of the power for change provided by a functional social environment that meets the specific needs of a particular individual. Along with LDL, the PSWG became a safe refuge during an extremely difficult, emotional time.

I choose to structure my life using a transpersonal orientation in which I integrate various spiritual perspectives into an eclectic, holistic approach. I regard it as my responsibility to take care of my own needs and to address my own conflicts. During a crisis, in the presence of positive support, I believe we can forge a stronger identity and be of greater service to others. It was through the steady destruction of my familiar world by the underlying pandemic, sociocultural conflict, academic politics, and personal upheaval that I was able to begin reimagining my identity and redirecting my career with a clearer sense of who I was now, what I wanted moving forward, and how I would proceed. I had no clue that this struggle was far from resolved, that it would require such protracted and intense self-reflection, and that it would involve so much renewal over a long, hot Texas summer.

## *Candace*

In May, I remember feeling weary. We realized COVID-19 was not going away any time soon. Summer classes were all going to be delivered online. I worked with the Distance Learning team to help create content for an online certification course faculty would need to take before teaching online for the summer and fall. After work, I still took my dog for a run on the empty campus. As the sun went down, I would lie in a hammock in my backyard, look at my garden and the sky, trying to empty my mind. I did not watch TV. I did not talk to anybody. It was exhilarating to be at the frontlines of helping people. But the lack of control, the trajectory of our lives, was so unpredictable. "How can I help?" started to feel like, "How long can I maintain the energy to be helpful?"

On May 25, in the midst of the fears and anxiety surrounding the pandemic and the move to online teaching, George Floyd was killed as Officer Derek Chauvin pinned him down by holding a knee on his neck for an excruciating nine and a half minutes. I do not intend here to minimize the importance of remembering other Black victims of police violence, particularly oft-forgotten Black women (for which the #SayHerName movement was created) such as Breonna Taylor, but the George Floyd case was a national catalyst, sparking protests throughout the country. One of our own university students was shot by police during a peaceful protest. Our students and faculty of color were not alright. None of us was alright.

I was appointed to a faculty and staff morale task force that summer to better understand the experiences of faculty and staff and to make recommendations to administrative leadership on strategies for supporting faculty and staff during COVID-19. We developed surveys and ran focus groups. We heard from mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. People were afraid for their jobs because of budget cuts, but they were also afraid for their lives due to COVID-19. One

focus group member summed up what so many felt: "I love my job, but I am not willing to die for it."

In July, I got COVID-19. I had a fever for a week, lost my appetite completely for two weeks, and had a raging headache for a solid month. But there was no time to be sick. I was working from home, so I took one or two days off. I powered through so no one would notice. Plus, many of my colleagues faced much more difficult and painful battles.

I soon realized, however, that I could not meet the needs of faculty without help. I found faculty experts and gave them stipends to lead learning communities on teaching large classes and assessing student learning online. In addition, many faculty were transitioning to a new LMS, Canvas, which also became a focus of many of our conversations.

I was still asking "How can I help?" but the answers started becoming less obvious and harder to manage. I read a book called *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World* by Vivek Murthy (2020) about how belonging can save our lives, and how engaging in constructive social relationships improves our physical and emotional well-being. The paradox is that the human connection we craved that summer also posed the greatest risk of killing us. It became even more important to figure out how to sustain social connectedness online going into the fall.

Our university had made plans to return to face-to-face classes in the fall, and in June began exploring equipping all classrooms with cameras and microphones to accommodate multiple teaching scenarios, including what was termed "hy-flex" classes. Late in the summer, I ran workshops on teaching in multiple modalities.

In addition, there was a heightened sense of anxiety about engaging with students in the classroom who might refuse to wear a mask. I brought in a faculty expert to teach the faculty de-escalation strategies. Amid pandemic worries, faculty expressed concerns about how to talk to students about the George Floyd incident and the protests over systematic racial injustice. I engaged experts to run sessions on how to talk to students about race and ethnicity. The upcoming presidential election also produced anxiety among faculty.

Such a change: Faculty who once longed to engage students in the classroom were now afraid of engaging in the classroom with those same students. In addition, there was palpable fatigue and malaise. What a difference the summer made in all our psyches! As the pandemic wore on, faculty were losing family members, and many had become ill themselves. We wanted to think that things would be back to normal, not knowing there would be no more "normal." We went into fall with high anxiety and low expectations, but we were determined to persevere.

**Fall 2020**

*Catherine*

The summer had not been the recharging interlude that I had expected (far from it); however, it had brought its own rewards. I found two functional communities in FD's LDL and the PSWG, both of which offered the collegiality that I sorely needed. Although the university had announced the return of in-person classes in the fall, I received an age-related accommodation to continue teaching synchronously since there was no vaccine yet. I contacted Candace at the end of the summer asking for potential workshops on facilitating genuine (albeit difficult) conversations on current pressing social justice issues. I wanted to better meet the needs of my students at where they were in their own lives. She indicated that she had already recognized this need and that several workshops were in preparation.

The main teaching challenge that I faced at the onset of the fall semester was initiating my classes via Zoom rather than switching over midway as I had done in the spring. This was a "heavy lift" that presented a different set of obstacles. I was utilizing Tracs more fully than in the past and wanted to further expand my use of Zoom and other technology in teaching. The university was transitioning to Canvas as our new LMS, and faculty had the option to further postpone adapting it until spring. While I had attended some Canvas trainings over the summer, I decided to delay changing over since I had heard how complicated and demanding it was. I decided that I already had enough challenges and other more pressing tasks and promising goals.

Unfortunately, I could not participate in LDL in the fall due to my class schedule. I attended numerous FD workshops, however, which offered an alternate supportive peer community. Further, given the serious social justice issues faced by the country, I wanted to adapt my teaching to incorporate more relevant content and facilitative processes. FD workshops provided legitimate training on diversity, equity, and inclusion by expert speakers. I continued to meet weekly with the PSWG; we identified meaningful activities with measurable outcomes. I kept in close contact with trusted friends and valued colleagues across campus. I pursued, achieved, and maintained a much healthier work-life balance.

In mid-October, I saw the announcement for the *Reflections* special issue on COVID-19. I reached out to Candace, and we decided to collaborate on a manuscript around our separate perspectives on the pandemic as experienced through our shared connection to FD. This turned out to be a highly significant turning point in my evolving regenerative process. Although we would not get started for a while, the potential of this project was energizing. It would become a regular and enjoyable source of support and collaboration.

November 3 brought the presidential election. Although pleased by the outcome, I was distressed by the deep divisions in the country. I was perplexed over how we would ever heal and find common middle ground. Habitually, I turned to work, put my head down (faced the computer), and focused on my classes and students. As so often in the past, I derived a sense of

calm from feeling competent about what I did, despite the unsteady times. The pandemic dragged on (as we all did), with no good news and no end in sight. At last, the semester was over, and I could finally shut down the computer and myself for a while.

### *Candace*

In addition to running new faculty orientation and other programs for faculty in the fall, I was scheduled to teach research methods face-to-face to graduate students in the College of Education. Half the students wanted to attend via Zoom, and the other half wanted to be in the classroom. I have taught online, and I have taught face-to-face. I have even taught to two different classroom sites simultaneously. However, I have never taught a class with some students in front of me, in masks, and the other students logged into Zoom.

I realized early on that my 30 years of teaching did not really prepare me for this new experience. I had taught this course before and felt confident. I soon realized that any semblance of security I had in my abilities went straight out the window that first week of class.

First, to make this work, I had to haul in my own laptop and extension cords to class so I could have one camera on me and the room camera on the students. Not everyone who came to the face-to-face class brought a laptop and, in masks, it was hard for the Zoom students to hear individual students speak. Everything, and I mean everything, took twice as long and never worked quite right.

Even though we all found the modality to be challenging, I spent time at the beginning of the semester asking the class to develop agreed-upon behavior and communication guidelines. That activity set a generous and respectful, cooperative tone, creating a space we all wanted to be in. Our most important agreement was that we would be generously graceful to ourselves and to each other. We all needed that grace at different times in the semester.

Another approach that helped me was my "ungrading" system. In research methods, students write parts of a research proposal on a topic of their choice. They either received full credit on the assignment, or they were required to implement my targeted feedback to revise the parts of the proposal that did not meet the learning outcomes. Setting the course up this way altered my positionality from judge to coach. In their evaluations at the end of the semester, students said the system took away some of the anxiety they were feeling that semester, and it created a more authentic learning experience for them.

It was still hard. Period. I never felt caught up and they did not either. But we managed; we managed together. And I have to say teaching last fall was one of the most transformative teaching experiences I have had in my career. It was impossible to go on autopilot. Every day was different. Everyone had their ups and downs—even me.

I hit a breaking point in November. My twelve-year-old rat terrier had cancer, and I knew she

was close to the end. One night I wanted to teach from home so I could be with her, but I was torn. I did not want to disappoint the students who were scheduled to be in the classroom that evening. I arranged for my daughter to stay with the dog and, when I went to class, all the students were on Zoom though none of them let me know. I was upset, more with myself than with them, for not just doing what I needed to do for myself. I felt, in that moment, completely unappreciated, and I did not know why I was giving so much. My dog died the next day in my arms.

I think many faculty hit that wall like I did at some point in teaching during COVID-19. In LDL, I heard story after story from faculty who showed up and sacrificed so much for their students, but felt it was never enough to help them all. Many students were having such a difficult time as well. I knew in my heart my students were not being dismissive of my needs—I just could not be "Super Teacher" anymore.

The next week, one of the students on Zoom poked me a little because I was late getting something into Canvas. I stopped. I was not angry. I took a breath and chose my words deliberately, "I know things are difficult for you all right now. And I totally get it. But what I need you to know is that students are not the only ones who are living in a pandemic. I'm living in a pandemic, too, which means that I am experiencing many of the traumas you are. And this week, this week, I'm having a really hard time. I need the grace we promised each other at the beginning of the semester." My honesty shocked the students, but it also changed our relationship. I always really wanted to be very strong for my students, to be somebody they could lean on. But, you know, it worked out for me to be a human, too.

That class required me to be fully present. I was still not always at my best when I was fully present, but it challenged me to be mindful about being in the moment, about being person-centered instead of content-centered. And the students still learned. In fact, many of them thrived. We celebrated our resilience and our community on that last day of class.

So much happened that fall; it was a bit of a blur. It was the pandemic part three, and it kept dragging on.

**January-February 2021**

*Catherine*

Like most faculty, I successfully navigated the fall semester, although it was exhausting in ways that we did not fully appreciate at the time. The pandemic was still going full force and, along with students, we were feeling the strain. Nevertheless, I was cautiously optimistic about starting the spring semester since I thought I had achieved a certain equilibrium despite the overall stress. The winter break provided a much needed respite from the long haul of the previous semesters. However, the contentious national politics became more divisive, culminating in the unbelievable assault of the Capitol on January 6. Regardless, I was determined to start fresh, and

I felt ready to power up for the spring.

That feeling was short-lived, however, when I tried to set up my courses in early January. I had taught these courses before, so I had a false sense of security. Faculty were now forced to use Canvas as our LMS, which was exponentially more complex than Tracs. Despite having attended training and seeking self-help online, I was totally lost once I attempted to use the platform. Looking at the Canvas homepage on my computer screen, my emotional reaction was immediate and intense; I was overwhelmed and could not process what I needed to do. In my entire career, I had never felt so helpless, which was beyond distressing, not to mention the added strain of starting my classes in a few weeks. In addition to my synchronous course, I was teaching an online course and developing another online course for the first time. I was quite excited about this new direction; however, there were complications. I was using new editions of texts, which were substantially revised, requiring major updates in all courses. Further, I could not find the online course template I was supposed to use since it had not been migrated from the previous LMS as planned.

It was a perfect "virtual" storm, and the computer screen was now a source of extreme stress (panic, really), far outweighing any prior experience. IT support had limited its hours and had long wait times. I had so much work to do in so little time with no viable help. This was a completely alien place to be, especially for a seasoned faculty member. We are accustomed to being competent and in control. I do not remember ever feeling so hopeless in my job. I had to take stock. Eventually, through multiple inquiries, I located support through Distance Learning. I booked individual consultations with instructional designers daily, often multiple ones. I slowly, very slowly, so slowly began to find my way. Time is such a limited resource, and figuring out all the correct little buttons to click on hidden pages in Canvas was consuming massive amounts of it. My skills gradually increased, although I still needed occasional help, and I never felt fully confident with this new LMS.

By early February, however, my classes were successfully launched, although I was still taking it one day at a time with Canvas. The pandemic was wearing on all of us, and the grinding stress of it was impacting students, although their effort to stay focused and move forward was clearly evident. Their patience with my technology fumbles on Zoom and Canvas was commendable, and I appreciated them as fellow learners more than ever. With a different schedule, I was able to attend LDL occasionally; seeing friendly familiar faces and hearing similar, relatable stories was like an oasis amidst the endless expanse of the minutia of Canvas. And the PSWG continued to enhance our collaborative project.

Then, on February 13, out of nowhere, Texas was hit by Winter Storm Uri, widely described in the media as a 500-year event. This unprecedented ice storm caused a one-week man-made failure of the independent power grid with massive outages across the state. The extreme frigid conditions lasted for five days. The university, along with everything else, shut down. Classes were cancelled for a week and a half, although the storm's immediate negative impact lasted much longer. I personally experienced lengthy intermittent (eight to 14 hour) power outages

each day, as well as a boil-water notice for several additional days. As it turned out, my situation was far better than that of many other Texans.

This crisis resulted in exponential stress and immense disruption that took a physical and emotional toll on everyone beyond the already exhausting pandemic and unrelenting social turmoil. It seemed to drain any remaining reserves of energy and optimism. It was a devastating blow to students, since they not only felt the accumulated strain, but many experienced personal and familial problems, one after another. They encountered financial losses, property damage, displacement, internet disruptions, and on and on. I reached out to let them know that I was available to offer academic support, and I received a flood of replies. While they were managing to cope with it all, they appreciated my reassurances. I streamlined assignments, extended deadlines, offered alternative formats, and increased flexibility, all of which helped them to stay on track.

Along with fellow faculty, I struggled to adjust my course calendars and content due to lost time (two cancelled class sessions) and connectivity (many students were without reliable power or steady internet) while maintaining academic standards. The students were remarkably adaptive, attending class, submitting papers, and communicating with me, but they seemed depleted. The small adjustments made a big impact; we were able to regroup and to persevere. But the latest iteration of "new COVID-19 normal" was now "after the storm, new COVID-19 normal." I could hardly believe that, in response to these necessary adjustments, I would have to redo my Canvas sites after I had worked so diligently to get them organized in the first place. In addition to having to post revised assignments, rubrics, due dates, etc., Canvas has many specific embedded links that had to be corrected for each separate change. This is an extremely tedious process, and there is no room for error. It was back to the doldrums of Canvas for me.

Meanwhile, faculty do more than teach. I had kept up my high level of service, yet I needed to attend to my scholarship. I had numerous writing projects and looming deadlines. So, at the end of February, I joined another FD learning community, Write Watchers. They met twice a week for focused writing time and mutual support. I directed my energy toward short-term goals. Since Candace conducted the sessions, it allowed us to meet regularly to work on this article. I continued to attend occasional LDL sessions and FD workshops, and the PSWG remained a bright spot of collegiality. Unbelievably, there were still several weeks to mid-term, yet it felt as if the semester should be long over.

### *Candace*

Spring tends to bring a feeling of hopefulness, and that is how my spring started. We had news that we might be able to get the vaccine, even on our campus. We continued our programming. I did a few workshops for those faculty who had not been teaching in the fall, or because they were moving to Zoom teaching. I ran a workshop for faculty on how to document the impact of COVID-19 on performance reports—these are the types of events I was used to working on prior to COVID-19. It looked as if we were moving out of the pandemic and reclaiming our lives.

That was, until the snowstorm.

In mid-February, Texas experienced one of the most severe snowstorms in the state's history. The snow and ice storm crippled our power infrastructure. Classes were canceled for a week and a half. Most faculty, staff, and students went without power and water for at least a day or two. Some were without power and water for a week or more. On top of the pandemic. We had thought a pandemic was bad, but now, all at once, we were living on the bottom two rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: physiological and safety needs.

Since communication was difficult because of the power outages, news about students was infrequent. In addition, many faculty and staff were tending to their own broken pipes and power/water problems. As I regained power and internet, I started hearing stories about students not having enough food and living in apartments with no power or water. On the Saturday after the storm, I started emailing people to try to arrange a presentation with our Vice President of Student Affairs and a faculty member in our counseling program. They graciously agreed and, with two days' notice, I hosted a Zoom presentation called "After the Storm: What Students Need Right Now."

Almost 200 faculty and staff attended that presentation, faculty and staff who had gone without power and water themselves. So many of the attendees and presenters had some type of damage they had to tend to. However, they put aside their own needs to find out how to support student needs as we came back from the storm. Virtual or not, our resilient community of care showed up.

**March 2021**

*Catherine*

Now, here I am, exactly one year later, Friday, March 12, staring at my computer screen again and once more looking out the window in disbelief. Rather than seeing an email portending a stressful change or attending an unsettling meeting, I am reading a message of hope: confirmation for my first COVID-19 vaccine appointment. Instead of looking out of my office window, I am at home, still quarantine. My only contacts are via Zoom—no hallway, no workroom, no running into a helpful colleague in the hallway.

So many times, like so many other people, I often wondered if I would ever get here. I managed to adapt, like everyone else, and to not burn out in the process. I enjoyed feeling more technologically skillful, despite the tedium of Canvas, but still missed the pre-pandemic sense of control and competence that most academics take for granted. I overcame so many obstacles with the support of trusted colleagues and friends. I especially valued FD through chats with Candace, learning communities, and workshops as well as the PSWG collaboration. I acquired a more refined and humane sense of compassion for myself and for others, which I sincerely wanted to incorporate into my work.

This March, as last year, I worked through spring break, continuing to make course adjustments since we were still in the aftermath of the winter storm. I could barely stay one week ahead in my classes, and I was behind in my online course preparation. Students seemed to need more regular support, and providing it sufficiently through email or Zoom was an ongoing challenge. I had long ago given up on any attempt at structured time management since everything took twice as long electronically. I braced for what's next, accepting that the ever-evolving concept of "normal" was elusive.

This endless pandemic year taught me to pay attention to self-care. I scheduled walks in my daily planner and purchased a stand-up desk for the improvised office in my kitchen. I let go of any notions of how things were supposed to be, which was just the latest reminder of this constant life lesson. I taped a copy of the Serenity Prayer to my laptop and found myself relying on it like never before. At least for now, I finally felt centered in this unpredictable chaos. I applied the ecological model to my own life by constructing a supportive social environment and connecting to it frequently. Maybe almost forty years of being a social worker counts for something after all.

During the past year, I was often surprised by the intensity and duration of my emotional reactions. I finally worked through the grief that I had felt—but did not recognize—over hurts, losses, and disappointments. Like so many profound emotional transitions, once insight is acquired, the negative "charge" that I had been carrying for so long gradually dissipated. I have always regarded myself as a critical thinker and problem solver. I came to accept that some situations are not rational and cannot be changed. I redefined who I thought I was, what I thought I wanted, where I thought I belonged, and where I was going. Through this circuitous process, I arrived at my own personal developmental "new normal."

Despite it all, in many ways, I feel gratitude for this year of COVID-19. I would like to say that I have no regrets, but that would not be true. If I could do some things over, I would, although that is not how it works. I may have finally learned the lesson (or not) of letting go of expectations and perceived control in exchange for gaining a sense of acceptance and peace. I have a renewed awareness of belonging, even though it still feels tenuous at times. I once again look forward to another summer. Even with the continued uncertainty of COVID-19, I count my blessings every day. This time during summer break, I will most definitely turn off the computer. I plan to serenely contemplate the question posed by Mary Oliver (1990) at the end of her poem (my favorite), "The Summer Day": "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (p. 80).

### *Candace*

Milestones are important. As I write these words, I think back on one year ago. For me, this year has been a tale of longing and belonging, of forming and transforming. I hate this pandemic. That we have lost people we love. That I cannot be with my friends to share music and meals. But I will never be the same. What I saw in the people that I worked with every day was selfless

service, love, generosity, community, a community as I have never experienced it before. Maybe I have always taken community for granted. Because my colleagues and students showed up for me, I know that I will never be the same, and I am happy about that. I saw faculty being brave in the classroom and showing up. Even though they were taking care of their own difficulties, they showed up for students. I saw administrators who showed up, working 14-hour days, every day, just to keep this university moving forward. I saw students show up for each other, and for me. As we all struggled, we just kept showing up and showing up and showing up. Maybe *showing up* is the real key to belonging—sometimes as the care-seeker, sometimes as the caregiver, and sometimes both at once. Maybe we just need to show up and ask, "How can I help?"

## Conclusion

Our shared reflection does not conclude; it continues. This may be the stopping point of our narrative, but it is not the end of our COVID-19 story. The pandemic rages on, both nationally and globally. While the country is ramping up vaccinations and adapting to this ever-evolving crisis (along with other ongoing crises), new virus variations emerge, and people question how to proceed among a maze of mixed messages. It is not clear when (or if) the pandemic will end, or whether the "newest normal" will just continue to be a moving target. While next year may be less "scary" than this one, it will still surely be full of uncertainty, confusion, and stress.

As our narrative conveys, the COVID-19 crisis was—and continues to be—a massive disrupter, in both constructive and destructive ways. These opposing forces actually work together to create productive change and growth. While this awareness represents well-established ancient wisdom, we learned it at a deep level through both our individual and shared personal experience. We both had to deconstruct our reality in the face of this crisis in order to reconstruct it in a more fruitful way. This was often a painful process, as growth can be; yet, in an ironic twist, COVID-19 pushed us both to more positive outcomes that we might otherwise have achieved.

The most profound of these unanticipated outcomes was our separate yet shared intention to pursue functional community and genuine belonging. In addition to providing mutual support, we took different paths to this ultimate goal. Candace created FD programs that met both her needs and those of faculty, and Catherine participated in these programs and created other opportunities. In this way, we built upon our previous selves as well as uncovered new desires, and found unexpected sources of support. It was not that COVID-19 changed everything, but it altered our reality enough to move us in unanticipated and innovative directions to meet this most basic human need to belong.

As former and current directors of FD, we propose that "belongingness" is a rich area for future research. While there is rapidly expanding multi-disciplinary scholarly literature on the impacts of COVID-19, there is an apparent dearth of research relevant to our narrative. Two immediate ideas emerge from our experience last year on potential research topics: 1) how FD can expand support beyond traditional programs and perhaps interface with social work's natural fit in this

area and 2) how FD can facilitate building a sense of belonging among faculty that expands upon existing literature focused on faculty-student relating.

If our mid-March 2021 selves could talk to our mid-March 2020 selves, what would we say? What lessons have we learned? There is so much to convey from the vantage point of one year later. Mainly, no one has done a pandemic before (at least not like this one), and there is no guidebook or set of rules (at least not at present). We know for sure that there is no returning to the "old normal," either individually, institutionally, or socially. In retrospect, we both learned that we should not wait for a crisis to seek what really matters. This is yet another reminder of connecting to ancient wisdom during crisis.

If we could recommend one thing that we hope our earlier selves might remember, what would it be? Connect with others, seek supportive communities, find compassionate people, cultivate these relationships, and pursue meaningful interactions. Know that you belong; *that* place *and those* people are out there, although you may need to initiate a community. Show up for others and for yourself. It is relationship that matters, and this critical support is there, even among professional colleagues in a big bureaucracy. People's ability to give to each other is remarkable in that way. Then, trust that you will figure out this crisis and navigate it the best way that you can. Our shared story tells us that you (and we) will get through it and develop from it—together. As poet David Whyte (1997) so elegantly states, "There is no house like the house of belonging" (p. 4).

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