



Teaching note—teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown at the university of Windsor: Faculty, graduate teaching assistant and student experience

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Abstract

In response to the global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions, including the University of Windsor, transitioned swiftly to virtual learning, necessitating innovative approaches to ensure academic progress amidst the cancellation of in-person classes and exams. This transition was particularly significant for the University of Windsor, situated in Southwestern Ontario, where the pandemic's impact was felt deeply, with implications for both the university community and the broader region. Despite initial challenges, the subsequent summer semester saw smoother operations, attributed to collective learning experiences among faculty, graduate assistants, and students, particularly in the School of Social Work. This paper examines the delivery of a Master of Social Work course, Challenges in Human Behavior, during the pandemic, showcasing the use of virtual platforms and innovative assessment strategies. Insights from faculty, graduate assistants, and students reveal varying experiences and challenges, highlighting the importance of proactive communication, support mechanisms, and student-led initiatives in enhancing the online teaching and learning experience. As the educational landscape continues to evolve amidst uncertainty, these findings offer valuable recommendations for preparing educators, fostering instructor-student communication, and empowering students as active participants in their educational journey, ultimately shaping the future of online social work education and beyond. This study underscores the resilience and adaptability of educational institutions in navigating unprecedented challenges, while also recognizing the ongoing need for collaboration and innovation in shaping the future of higher education in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Graduate programs, Group work, Online learning, Online teaching, Pandemic, Social work, Virtual learning.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This study presents a unique perspective on transitioning a Master of Social Work course, *Challenges in Human Behavior*, to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. What sets it apart is the comprehensive exploration of faculty, graduate assistant, and student experiences, offering nuanced recommendations for enhancing online social work education.

1. Introduction

In light of the global upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions worldwide underwent a seismic shift from traditional face-to-face lectures to the realm of virtual learning, harnessing the full spectrum of contemporary technological tools (Daniel, 2020; Mirick, 2020). The University of Windsor, in particular, faced a distinctive challenge during this period. As the pandemic reached North America in March 2020, the university found itself amidst preparations for final examinations. Responding swiftly, the University of Windsor transitioned to an essential service mode, necessitating the cancellation of all in-person classes, labs, and final exams. Faculties and instructors were tasked with the formidable challenge of identifying alternative assessment methods to ensure the seamless conclusion of the semester without compromising students' academic progress for the year.

Nestled in Southwestern Ontario, Windsor boasts a population exceeding 217,188 people (Statistics Canada, 2019). The University of Windsor, a home to over 16,321 undergraduate and graduate students (University of Windsor, 2019) is further distinguished by the School of Social Work situated in Downtown Windsor, offering comprehensive undergraduate (Bachelor) and graduate (Master and Ph.D.) programs in Social Work. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Windsor-Essex Community Health Unit recorded 2071 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, with 69 fatalities and 1332 recoveries between March 20, 2020, and July 23, 2020.

Despite the somewhat tumultuous conclusion of the winter semester, the subsequent summer semester at the University of Windsor unfolded with greater ease. This positive shift was attributed to the collective learning curve experienced by faculty, graduate assistants, and students across the university, with a notable impact on the School of Social Work. This paper delves into the nuances of delivering a Master of Social Work course, *Challenges in Human Behavior*, over six weeks during the pandemic. The course intricately explores how biological, psychological, and social theoretical perspectives shed light on the etiology, occurrence, and response to common life challenges.

Employing virtual platforms such as Zoom, Blackboard, and email communication, the course convened weekly for six sessions. The structure comprised two learning modules per meeting—a synchronous (live) learning module followed by an asynchronous (recorded) learning module, neatly separated by an hour-long lunch break. The assessment strategy encompassed weekly group and forum discussions, individual written critical reflections, and mid-term and final written assignments.

1.1. COVID-19

The prelude to the COVID-19 saga unfolded in December 2019 with a cluster of acute respiratory illnesses in Wuhan, Hubei province. This marked the onset of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), rapidly spreading throughout China (Wang et al., 2020; Zheng, Ma, Zhang, & Xie, 2020). March 11, 2020, witnessed the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring COVID-19 a pandemic, responding to the intensification of prevention and control measures (World Health Organization, 2020; Zheng et al., 2020). While the virus's origin remains under scrutiny, current evidence points to human transmission through the illicit trade of wild animals in Wuhan's Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, China (Chen et al., 2020).

COVID-19 exhibits a predilection for impacting older males with preexisting health conditions and weakened immune systems, leading to severe acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), acute respiratory failure, and complications akin to other respiratory infections like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) (Chen et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Yin & Wunderink, 2018). Despite this, a majority of patients manifest mild symptoms, ensuring a positive prognosis and recovery (Chen et al., 2020).

2. Online Teaching and Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

2.1. Faculty Experience

Over the past nine months, as a new faculty member, I had begun to get an understanding of the inner workings of the university and faculty of social work – and then the pandemic happened. When we learned about the pandemic, I felt like I was in a good position to address the changing needs of the students, research, and my role, as I am not new to social work. I have been working in the field for more than 20 years, including practice, research, evaluation, and administration. All of these roles have provided me with the experience to think critically about the need to adjust my spring 2020 Master of Social Work (MSW) course to online learning during a pandemic. What made this change slightly more daunting was that this would be students' introduction to a Master of Social Work program, the very first course of their graduate education. My teaching philosophy includes a focus on promoting critical thinking, engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy – whether that translates to online learning, or works well in the classroom, remained to be seen.

To be synchronous or asynchronous – that was the question. Learning that we would be teaching fully online resulted in several debates. The University of Windsor quickly moved to support mode and made several online education training sessions available to faculty. I felt very lucky to have so many resources, including learning center faculty experienced in online delivery, available at a moment's notice. At this point, the university did not implement a strict direction about how to administer or structure our online course, which I appreciated. While the direction was loose, the different perceptions of what would work best led to different course structures during the semester. There was, however, a concern among faculty that these differences would lead to student confusion and complaints.

Since being at the University of Windsor, I have met some of the most amazing students. Some of these students have stories of pain and struggle – living from hand to mouth, substance use, mental well-being, and the

overdose deaths of friends and family. Windsor is not a city full of financial resources, but it is a city full of amazing people. Caring for children, working multiple jobs, and caring for parents were likely situations for many students. Considering the context that may be impacting students during the pandemic, I decided to structure the course equally between synchronous and asynchronous learning.

Teaching live from home brought with it a set of unexpected events – deliveries during class, the blender, losing internet while teaching, and a loud cat. I initially attempted to remind students of our faculty and their journey into graduate studies with a virtual background of the campus, but that led to its own set of technology problems. I attempted to be patient with audio and video “differences”; students have differences in whether they like to keep their video on or off, and I was lax in suggesting students keep their video on. I was motivated by the reminder that my financial stability, a safe home, and family support were more than what many students may have been experiencing at the University of Windsor.

Prior to my course, while attending the week-long online learning training, we were told to be explicit, give instructions, give instructions in another way, and give some more instructions. So, whether it was about an assignment or a weekly exercise, I thought that I provided detailed information. However, after the final assignments, I realized that there was a lot of confusion. During class, email, and office hours, I felt like I was answering the same questions about assignment instructions. But, after reading the final two assignments, I realized that attention was waning. While the majority of students completed the assignments correctly, there were some who clearly were not paying attention in class or to the assignment description, rubric, or Blackboard announcement clarifying instructions. Indeed, this has happened occasionally when I have taught an in-person class, but nowhere to this extent. Because no one chose this situation and it was difficult to decipher whether my instructions were unclear, I gave a lot of leeway in marks.

One of the most unnerving situations I experienced with teaching online during a pandemic is that I had no idea what was happening with the students. I would usually be able to assess before, during, and after class how students were doing and whether they were absorbing the material and building their critical thinking skills or just how they were doing in general. But I found it very difficult to understand what was happening while we were all online. Many students started out using their video, but over time began to turn it off. Those who did keep their video on began to look tired, while trying to maintain their focus, and I became worried about “online overload”. It was as if I could see the motivation and energy seeping from the course and wondered whether it was me, the course, the summer, the pandemic, or all of the above. Even though there were some difficulties along the way, I saw some amazing growth. I was amazed at the weekly individual exercises after each asynchronous module. The attention to knowledge and critical thinking in students’ responses far exceeded my expectations. The Graduate Assistant provided a significant level of support – as it felt like we were constantly marking for seven weeks straight. I could not have done it myself and having a skilled assessor and knowledgeable colleague was a significant support during the course. Some students were apprehensive about the online platform but spoke up with questions and comments after a few classes. I also witnessed knowledge and critical thinking evolution through class and individual discussions and assignments. Overall, I have learned a great deal during this unprecedented situation and will bring this new knowledge forward in the goal of promoting education and critical thinking, no matter the context and platform.

2.2. Graduate Teaching Assistant Experience

As a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), and a Doctoral student perspective, the switch to online learning has been smooth in the short run, yet tiring over time. Although my duties as a GTA did not significantly change from graduate assistantships I held in the past, I did not receive formal training on performing GTA duties utilizing online platforms. This was a challenge as expectations remained the same for myself and colleagues who are assisting different professors throughout the School of Social Work. That said, having preparation meetings with Dr. Lwin before and throughout the course helped me connect the dots and equipped me with the necessary tools to ease the transition from the traditional in-person methods to the modern and seamless online approaches to learning and teaching.

While I enjoy assisting professors delivering lectures throughout the semester, I was hesitant at the beginning of this semester to deliver any lectures. My reasoning behind this hesitation is that I have a brief experience when it comes to not only online teaching but also teaching in general. Since I am only at the beginning of my teaching career, I was worried that the knowledge I am sharing might not resonate well with students. However, that was not the case. The course’s encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and assist her in lecturing classes as this is an area where even experienced professors are now forced to learn about and utilize as the future of in-person lectures remains unclear, at least for the upcoming semester. That said, I decided to deliver two synchronous (live) lectures utilizing online platforms tools such as Zoom and Blackboard. Surprisingly, this experience changed my view of online teaching, and my hesitation became a source of motivation as I enjoyed this unique opportunity and received substantial positive feedback from Dr. Lwin and students in the course as well.

Online learning did not only affect me as a GTA in this course but also in my primary role as a third-year doctoral student at the School of Social Work. As a result of the pandemic, in-person meetings with my dissertation supervisor, research commitments, and student-led publications initiatives had to be terminated and instead were held virtually. This was a challenge as I found virtual activities such as brainstorming, planning, and debating were not as natural as our pre-pandemic in-person meetings. I found the now-absent ability to physically transport from one classroom, office, and building to another as a socially soothing opportunity that gave me a break from the recently dismissed gathering while preparing me for my next commitment. However, being forced to cope with personal inconveniences in online learning was both meaningful and rewarding by the end of the semester as the university extended its essential service mode to the fall 2020 semester, meaning that I will now be better equipped and experienced for my next Graduate Assistantship along with the next chapter of my Doctoral studies when utilizing online methods in both teaching and learning.

While my overall experience when looking at online learning and teaching was positive, I worry about isolation fatigue and if it has any effects on my Doctoral studies journey and future opportunities such as graduate

assistantships, teaching, and research commitments as I am witnessing a pattern of exhaustion and impatience amongst my doctoral studies colleagues.

2.3. Student Engagement and Experience

As a graduate social work student, I had just returned from living in England for the past two years and was adjusting to being home in Windsor as the pandemic started to take place across Canada. Being out of school for three years, I was already anxious to become a graduate student, and when I found out classes were moved to an online format, my anxiety increased. I had never taken an online class before and now I had not only one course but two courses to navigate through at the beginning of my graduate studies. Not only was I adjusting to being back in school but now I was juggling a new job working midnight shifts in a women's emergency shelter. I was dealing with many new changes, including last-minute changes with my MSW program. The semester was supposed to spread out throughout the summer but was shortened to six weeks, which made me ineligible for provincial financial assistance. As a result, I faced a financial hardship that forced me to navigate last-minute arrangements to pay my tuition only two days before the deadline. This was a tight and stressful situation, which caused me to work more hours than I anticipated and therefore took time away from my schooling.

The week before classes began, I was unsure what was going on. I was constantly checking and rereading my emails; exploring BlackBoard Learn; and looking on the UWindsor site to see if I had missed any important information about my class. I knew classes were held on Zoom, but I did not receive my link to the class until the day before, which increased my stress level. I felt overwhelmed by the number of emails and changes made to the course prior to the start.

Then when classes first began, I did not have a physical space to attend lectures or complete assignments. I had family members working from home due to the pandemic, and I felt that my bedroom was the only space that would work. I found myself attending lectures and completing assignments on my bed, which was distracting and disorganized. When possible, I would move to the kitchen table, but I would often be distracted or interrupted.

Further, I had difficulties with my schedule and struggled to have a healthy balance, which is possibly related to the many changes and adjustments that took place in a short period of time. Between attending lectures, completing assignments and readings, and work commitments, I often found myself staying awake for over 24 hours at times. I found it also difficult to schedule online meetings with my professors and their graduate assistants as their office hours conflicted with my work schedule. Normally, when classes were held in-person, I would approach my professors after lectures or during breaks. However, having online lectures forced me to often utilize email communication if I was unable to attend online office hours. That said, my professors were accommodating, helpful, and patient as they offered to set up numerous Zoom meetings out of their scheduled hours.

On a personal level, I did not have much time for my friends or family, which sometimes made me feel isolated. This was further exacerbated by the lack of face-to-face interactions with my peers. As a returning graduate student, I did not know most of the students in my current cohort, making it more difficult to form relationships through online learning. Upon reflection, I realized how much I had relied on my peers previously when completing my Bachelor of Social Work and how much they contributed to my overall well-being and success. I found that as the course went on, I felt much more comfortable with my peers and found it easier to lean on them for support, but this did take more time to develop.

Although moving to online learning was an adjustment and stressful at times, there were some benefits for me, including being able to sleep-in and being able to attend class in my pajamas. I found my experiences with my professors and graduate assistants were positive, as they provided support, understanding, and attempted to make this transition easier for students. I found that they were honest about their experiences when it came to online teaching and learning in a way that normalized and validated how I was feeling. Having an asynchronous portion of the class allowed me to catch up on readings and lectures on my own time and shortened the lecture, which made it easier to focus on content. Lastly, I found the group discussion less stressful because each student was assigned randomly to breakout rooms on Zoom. This gave me the opportunity to meet, work, and have discussions with different students, instead of working with the same people.

The most beneficial aspect of online learning was my growth as a student. Learning online forced me to be more responsible and manage my time more effectively. Previously, I procrastinated often and found myself doing my assignments last minute; however, this was not an option for my online class, as the courses were so short. Online learning unlocked unknown potential and motivation that I was not sure I had, which makes me feel more confident moving into next semester as courses are set to resume online.

3. Recommendations

As we distill the multifaceted experiences encapsulated in our exploration of teaching and learning during a pandemic, a compendium of nuanced recommendations unfolds. Our collective insights coalesce into a tripartite framework, delineated across three pivotal spheres: Online Training, Instructor-Student Communication and Support, and Students-Led Learning Initiatives. In this expansive vision, we envisage a transformative trajectory for online social work education that not only mitigates challenges but propels the paradigm into a realm of enriched pedagogical possibilities.

3.1. Preparation and Training for Online Courses

A call for the recalibration of how we prepare educators, assistants, and students for the intricacies of online social work education. Critics, substantiated by our experiences (Báez, Marquart, Chung, Ryan, & Garay, 2019; Crisp, 2018) highlight concerns about the effectiveness of this pedagogical shift. Thus, the authors advocate for a comprehensive overhaul of training paradigms. Beyond instructors, this seismic shift demands that graduate assistants and students be active participants in tailored online orientations. Holistic preparation, rather than a unidirectional focus, will lay the groundwork for an elevated and equitable online learning experience.

A corollary to this paradigm shift is the imperative to master the tools that define the online educational landscape. From Zoom to Blackboard, a nuanced understanding of these platforms becomes as crucial as textbook

knowledge. In this vein, an expansive training curriculum should be crafted, covering not just the basics but delving into the pedagogical possibilities and potential pitfalls of each tool. This mastery is not just for instructors' benefit but serves as a catalyst for an immersive, engaging, and effective learning environment, enhancing the educational journey for all involved.

3.2. Instructor-Student Communication and Support

The veneer of easy access to technology belies the labyrinthine complexities of transitioning from in-person to online learning (Ali, 2020; Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020). Central to this paradigm is the need for robust instructor-student communication and support mechanisms. The authors draw on their experiences, highlighting a persistent dearth in this critical sphere throughout their semester. To address this lacuna, a proactive approach is advocated. The dissemination of detailed announcements preceding each weekly class is posited as a foundational strategy. This pre-emptive communication not only forewarns students but serves as a compass, guiding them through the intricacies of the virtual learning landscape.

In the vast expanse of virtual education, the authors underscore the value of post-class engagement. A comprehensive summary note, disseminated after each class, emerges as a lifeline for those who, for various reasons, couldn't attend the live session. This post-class anchor serves as more than just a recap; it becomes a repository of missed opportunities, ensuring that every student, irrespective of their virtual presence, can glean the essence of the class. It's not just about compensating for absenteeism; it's about fostering inclusivity in the digital realm.

3.3. Students' Led Learning Initiatives

In the mosaic of online learning, the authors posit a transformative role for students as active co-creators of their educational journey. Limited research on social work education in the online domain (Littlefield, 2019; Mirick, 2020) underscores the need for a paradigm shift. Building on the global potential of online teaching and learning to democratize knowledge (Brouns et al., 2017) the authors champion a reimagining of the student's role. A departure from the passive recipient, students should emerge as active contributors to the pedagogical narrative.

Acknowledging the diverse needs arising from varying educational levels, courses of study, and program progression points, the authors envision a bespoke approach to online education. Students, often beset with anxiety and heightened stress levels during the pandemic, should be accorded not just a voice but a pivotal role in shaping their educational trajectory. The recommendation transcends the traditional feedback model; it's about integrating students into the planning fabric, where their interests and needs become guiding principles in course development.

The pandemic accentuated the fragility of the educational ecosystem. In this crucible, the authors advocate for a seismic shift towards more student-centric learning initiatives. This goes beyond ad-hoc measures; it's about institutionalizing a space where students actively participate in planning their courses. The benefits are manifold – from heightened satisfaction to a sense of ownership over one's education. This recommendation isn't just a course correction; it's a manifesto for the democratization of the educational experience.

In essence, these recommendations are not just prescriptive measures; they represent a manifesto for the evolution of online social work education. It's a call to arms for educators, students, and administrators alike to transcend the challenges and seize the unprecedented opportunities that this transformative pedagogical landscape affords.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this teaching note underscores the diverse spectrum of experiences encountered by instructors, graduate assistants, and students during the unique academic challenges posed by the shift to online teaching. As illuminated through this exploration, the foray into virtual education brought forth numerous advantages, albeit not without its share of obstacles. The complexities of this semester, as documented in this paper, shed light on the multifaceted nature of adapting to online modalities.

The advantages of online teaching and learning became evident, marked by increased flexibility and accessibility. However, the journey was not without its share of difficulties, with challenges arising in the form of technological hiccups, asynchronous communication, and the need for adaptability in the face of unforeseen disruptions. The individualized nature of online education underscored the imperative for all parties involved—faculty, graduate assistants, and students—to step out of their comfort zones and embrace novel approaches to teaching, lecture delivery, assessment, and consultation.

This transformative period necessitated a re-evaluation of conventional teaching methods and a willingness to explore innovative avenues for academic engagement. It prompted educators to reassess their pedagogical approaches and encouraged students to adapt to new learning modalities. The online environment not only demanded a reconfiguration of teaching techniques but also highlighted the importance of fostering a sense of community and support in a virtual space.

Looking forward, uncertainty shrouds the future of in-person classes, making it crucial for educational institutions to remain agile and responsive to evolving circumstances. The one-year Master of Social Work program, emblematic of this adaptability, faces the prospect of producing graduates with an unexpectedly virtual academic experience. The upcoming semester's continuation in the online realm, coupled with the growing trend of agencies considering online placements for the winter term, further underscores the transformative impact of the ongoing paradigm shift in education. As stakeholders navigate these uncharted waters, the experiences documented in this teaching note offer valuable insights and lessons for the evolving landscape of higher education.

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