

## The Distance Learning Experiment

I moved to New York in July 2019. I picked up a small room off of craigslist that fit my bed and my dresser with just enough space to walk in-between the two. I thought to myself, "I don't need space; I have an office at the school and the city with plenty of places to sit and work." I moved in with two people I met on craigslist, which became tense and distant relationships. Moving to any new city is a challenging process. This process is made more difficult by the rigorous schedule and dedication required by doctoral study. I certainly struggled to adapt to life in New York, but I was motivated because I was pursuing my dream at my top choice school. When engaged in my work, I felt there was no place I would rather be.

As someone who has struggled with anxiety and depression since early adolescence, the pandemic's onset was devastating but not entirely unexpected. My anxiety made me follow the pandemic closely. From the first day I saw reports about the "new mysterious virus" in China, I knew it would catch up to us in the U.S. Despite how my anxiety had prepared me, I could never have prepared myself for what it would be like to be confined in a small room with one window and no workspace for four weeks. I had no privacy, as the walls were thin, and my two roommates could hear everything I said/did and vice versa. I worked from my bed, the same place I also slept and ate all of my meals. Somehow my space felt even smaller as the wave of coronavirus cases crushed New York City outside. I still recall the uneasy feeling from the persistent call of ambulance sirens outside my window, constantly reminding me that the outside world is dangerous and deadly.

In my panic and wanting to make sense of the impending doom, I began the only logical thing a researcher knows to do, collect data. I was obsessed. I collected data from multiple sources each morning and night and created my own visualizations to track the spread. I felt numb as I followed the case increases and modeled an exponential curve to fit the data. Though we were given a week off to "adjust to online learning," I spent this entire week barely sleeping and in a state of hypervigilance. I stayed connected with people through my phone and social media, but I spent most of my time in a state of dissociation. I felt as though I was observing someone else's life and seeing the world through a lens. I dove into fantasy books and movies as a distraction from the confusing reality we were all living. When I wasn't distracting myself, I was overindulging in media that stoked fear and panic.

There was no "adjustment" taking place on my end. I felt suspended in honey, trapped. When classes resumed, it was every professor for themselves. Some adapted the course to be more flexible, some did not. Some were in constant contact regarding changing expectations; some dropped off the map and went silent for weeks. Some used zoom, some used blackboard. There was no longer a consistent expectation for being a "good student" in this new remote instruction experiment. Teachers and students both did the best they could. But there simply was not enough support. Sometimes, professors would offer class time for us to process how we've been coping with the pandemic, and this time usually resulted in students expressing frustration, sadness, and fear. Often, we cried with one another for the life we had abruptly lost and the uncertainty of what was to come.

Much of the Spring 2020 semester is a blur. Even reflecting back on that period almost a year later, I hardly remember what I did on a day-to-day basis. What I remember vividly is how little support I felt and the sinking feeling that this is a new reality. I was told that the pandemic would “no doubt impact [my] entire graduate career,” and that advice could not ring any more accurate to this day. I’ve had to postpone, revise, and re-revise my research project. As a psychologist-in-training, a considerable part of my education is learning “how to be in the room with people.” How do I learn to be in the room with people when I can’t physically be in a room with people? My clinical work transitioned online. Though telehealth is a valuable skill, I hardly remember what it is like to sit in a room with a client without a screen between us. On the one hand, I believe the adversity we have faced will help us be competent and prepared clinicians. Still, I also wonder how much I am missing in this virtual world. Though we have “adapted” to remote learning a year later, I can’t help but wonder, at what expense?

Fall 2020 was the start of my second year in the doctoral program and my teaching assistantship. Though I worked as a TA during my undergraduate, I had never delivered content in a lecture. I think at the time, the whole system was scrambling. I remember being notified only 24 hours before the TA orientation and leaving feeling more confused than confident. One week before the start of the semester, I was assigned as a TA for two recitation sections of Personality Psychology. At this point, my only experience with synchronous online classes was as a doctoral student, where everyone is on-time, prepared, and visible on-camera. I had no idea what to expect when I started teaching. On the first day of classes, not a single student turned their cameras on, and each week I was teaching to a sea of black squares on my screen. The preferred mode of communication seemed to be through the chat function. I found myself wholly scattered in each class as I tried to simultaneously share my screen, lecture course content, monitor the chat, and competently respond to questions. To say I felt unprepared was an understatement.

For those of you that are unfamiliar with what life is like as a second-year clinical psychology doctoral student, let me fill you in: I was taking five classes, working 16 hours per week in my clinical externship as a college counselor, teaching two undergraduate recitation sections, corralling a team of research assistants to collect data for my thesis project, and attempting to be part of multiple professional development groups for the expected “service positions” we volunteer for as budding professionals. In Fall 2020, I was spending, on average, 35 hours per week just in zoom calls, not including any “off-camera” work time. When I began my doctoral education, I expected to give up dating and having an expansive social calendar. Still, I never expected I would have to give up things like spending time at the gym, joking with my cohort in the shared-office space, and physical contact with those I love. The toll of the expectations that were placed on me became unbearable. I was working 60-70 hours per week but with low productivity. I worked all day, every day but never felt adequately prepared. When I failed a midterm in October, I was sent into panic mode. I began to question my ability, passion for the field, and whether I should drop out of the program altogether. Classic symptoms of burnout, and it only took seven weeks. I could no longer remember why I was willing to sacrifice

anything for a degree and was hung up on this irony: my education to become a mental health professional was causing my own mental breakdown.

As the semester dragged by, I could tell that engagement among many students was low. Questions were answered by the same few people, there were wide gaps in test scores, and it felt like some students were falling through the cracks. I received multiple emails a week describing crises and asking for support and accommodations. My student's family members were coming down sick with the virus, and some were dying. Some students were caring for and schooling their younger siblings during classes. Some students had to pick up full-time jobs during the pandemic to replace lost family income and take exams while at work. International students were worried about their family members abroad and were often isolated themselves here in the city. I was asked multiple times to provide private tutoring. I referred many students to counseling and disability services, but I also know that many clinics were overloaded with cases. As a TA, my hands were tied when it came to making accommodations within the course, but I felt like there was so much more we could do to provide support for students.

I sought support from my own program as I navigated our new harsh reality. In most cases, I was provided with validation and a listening ear. Very few gave me any sort of concrete support or recommendations for changing my situation overall. I began to wonder if they even knew how to support a student in the current reality. I resolved to just "survive" the semester and to make changes in the spring. I have a hard time disentangling what is normal for a non-pandemic graduate student and extra from the pandemic. My training has taught me that behavior is always a product of both the person and their situation. I've spent years learning to set and respect boundaries, and I have learned to be a confident advocate for myself and others. The advocacy I did for myself and my students was largely ignored. The situation stayed the same, and I felt a certain level of helplessness. The passion for my work was no longer there.

Ultimately, my students and I survived the semester. I completed my classes. I saw my clients to the end of their finals. I submitted final grades and took two weeks off of everything. On the one hand, I am impressed by the persistence I see from many students and how they rose to the challenge. I am so grateful for many of the privileges that allow me to have continued employment, housing, and meals. On the other hand, I despise that the expectations placed on us as students during a pandemic were mainly the same as in the non-pandemic world. For many, including myself, these expectations were no longer realistic.

One year later, as the pandemic continues to rage around us, I have a new perspective. I am no longer willing to sacrifice so much to be in the program. The kinds of sacrifices we are expected to make as doctoral students left us more vulnerable to the pandemic's impacts. I no longer see my education as a sacrifice. Instead, I see it as any other time in my life. No matter where I am in my career, I deserve to be happy, have balance, and feel supported. I decided to share my experience, not because I think my perspective is particularly unique, but because I want to advocate for change. I am calling on educators everywhere to adapt their courses to reflect the realities that are impacting students. Many are finding it harder to concentrate and attend

classes and experiencing negative impacts from poor mental health. Instead of punishing students for not attending, reward them points for attending. When you notice someone misses classes, email them to see if they are well or need support referrals. Offer flexible assignments that allow students to maximize their interests and abilities. Consider a grading scheme that gives students options of which kinds of assignments they want to complete for credit. Offer rolling deadlines that do not penalize students for taking care of other things in their lives. Schedule the course in modules that gives students (and yourself) a break from Zoom, such as by assigning a podcast or other activity that facilitates learning outside of the classroom. Learn about how anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues impact learning and what you can do as an educator to create a safe and supportive learning environment. Learn where to refer your students when they come to you for support so that they never feel helpless.

The bottom line is that our ingrained systems of educational accountability, defined as attendance, participation, meeting deadlines, and presentation, are harming our students (and ourselves). This harm can be avoided by adjusting policies and providing increased flexibility and support. I recognize that most people did their best and that no one wanted to be in the remote-learning experiment. But our best was not good enough. One year later, we are STILL in a pandemic, and it is not too late to bring more humanity into education. As we prepare ourselves and our students for a new and still unknown phase of the remote learning experiment, we will again be in a new phase of trial and error. Our students are not research participants but real adolescents and adults impacted by an economic recession, illness, family trouble, financial strain, and loss. Let's treat them as humans and not just objects of learning. We all deserve more support and can provide that for one another.