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When Worlds Collide: Framing Students' Challenges with Stay-at-home Learning During COVID-19 through the Lens of Conflicting Role Identities

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Abstract:

Based on a survey of undergraduate business students at a private Midwestern university in the United States, we found that the abrupt mid-semester transition from campus learning to at-home online learning due to the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic led to an unexpected challenge for students. Students reported that stay-at-home learning eroded support for their student role while also creating conflicts between the student role and other competing roles, such as child, sibling, or supplemental wage earner. As a result, they significantly lacked motivation to complete schoolwork during stay-at-home orders. Using a framework rooted in role identity theory, we analyze this role erosion and role conflict. Based on that analysis, we suggest potential actions for faculty to mitigate the adverse impact that this role erosion/conflict has on learning and, thus, bolster the student role while simultaneously reducing conflict between the student role and other competing roles. As we brace for multiple semesters of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, such efforts to facilitate positive stay-at-home learning experiences for our students will contribute to determining our academic success and our educational institutions' economic viability.

Keywords: Remote Learning, Role Identity Theory, Role Conflict, Role Erosion, COVID-19, Stay-at-Home Learning, Resolving Learning Challenges.

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1 Introduction

In Season 7, Episode 8 of the American sitcom series, *Seinfeld*, character George Costanza laments the potentially devastating impact of his two carefully crafted worlds colliding:

You have no idea of the magnitude of this thing! If she is allowed to infiltrate this world, then George Costanza as you know him ceases to exist!

You see, right now, I have “relationship George”, but there is also “independent George”. That’s the George you know, the George you grew up with—movie George, coffee shop George, liar George, bawdy George... And he’s dying, Jerry! If relationship George walks through this door, he will kill independent George! A George divided against itself, cannot stand!

In early March, 2020, students across the United States faced a similar dilemma as universities around the country had to take action due to rising coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. As a result, universities rapidly transitioned from face-to-face instruction on campus to remote learning facilitated by technology. For many schools, this change also necessitated that many students who lived in student housing on or around campus had to return to their primary residence to resume the semester. In days, students’ carefully crafted world of being an independent college student collided with the world they had left at home.

To better understand students’ experience during this time, we had 154 undergraduate business students at a private Midwestern university complete a comprehensive survey regarding the benefits and challenges they experienced in completing the semester online from home. While individual experiences varied, common themes regarding challenges associated with pursuing higher education online from home emerged. One theme that stood out, because we had not previously anticipated it, concerned conflicting role identities. While we did not conduct our survey to explore identity conflicts, in doing so, we better understood the challenges that students faced in a more meaningful way.

In this paper, we draw on role identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000) as a framework to explain the calamity that ensued when these worlds collided, discuss how the “independent student” almost ceased to exist when it clashed with competing roles, and explain the consequences this conflict had on students’ motivation for doing coursework. Further, we discuss certain actionable insights that have emerged as lessons learned from the experience.

We write this paper to draw attention to students’ conflicting role identities and to offer some possible ways to mitigate the problems that these conflicts create. We need additional research to better understand these conflicts’ causes and consequences and to determine the extent to which students experience them. However, we lack the scope here to conduct such research.

2 The Challenges

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers often referred to it as “the great equalizer” as no level of wealth, prestige, or accomplishment precluded one from its effects (Mein, 2020). However, other researchers quickly challenged this notion as it became clear that different groups of people faced different challenges and hardships and that the pandemic affected some much more than others. The same applied to our students. They might have been forced to leave campus at the same time, but the home environment they returned to during the stay-at-home period varied, and some students faced more challenges than others.

While many students may have returned to their childhood homes with dedicated workspaces, reliable Internet connections, and welcoming parents, others did not feel they had a safe, welcoming, well-equipped, or distraction-free environment to return to. Some international students remained stuck on campus and temporarily cut off from their families; others undertook an arduous journey to their home country followed by weeks of strict quarantine. Some students even fell sick with COVID-19. While some students could still work, many lost jobs, internships, and other income sources. Many students needed to find temporary employment to support themselves and their education while completing school from home. Some students showed great mental resilience and a positive “can-do” attitude towards stay-at-home coursework. Others felt worried, completely lost motivation, and experienced negative and depressing thoughts.

Across the board, though, students expressed that they found doing coursework during stay-at-home more challenging than expected. They voiced concerns about both technology-based instruction, such as video/Zoom meetings rather than classroom lectures, and a lack of motivation and desire to finish the semester. Students identified motivation loss as the most frequent challenge they faced. Narrative accounts from students indicated that we could trace their lack of motivation for coursework to a loss of identity as college students. As one student wrote: "There is almost no motivation to do any school and it has severely impacted my learning.... I barely feel like I am a student anymore."

Based on theories of role identity and behavior (Stryker & Burke, 2000), we believe situational factors of the stay-at-home environment made it difficult for students to maintain their identity as independent college students. We highlight two factors that contributed to the role erosion: the lack of structural support for the college student role and the conflict between the independent student role and competing roles.

3 Loss of Support for the Student Role

Roles exist in relation to others. As Stryker and Burke (2000, p. 286) have noted: "social roles are expectations attached to positions in networks of relationships". In a family network, individuals have roles such as "spouse" and "parent", while, on a college campus, they have roles such as "professor" and "student". The social networks that surround individuals allow them to enact these roles (e.g., behaving as "a student" or as "a professor"). When individuals internalize role expectations, they become identities (Carter & Grover, 2015). People confirm and maintain their social roles and their corresponding identities by seeking out situations in which they can enact and express these roles (Stryker & Burke, 2000). As a consequence, students will more likely feel like "real students" when on campus.

Formal structures such as classroom lectures, study groups, student clubs, and other academic activities direct students to act like students while on campus. While on campus, students also frequently participate in social networks that reinforce their identity as a student. These networks help store and convey information that pertain to students' daily activities on campus. For instance, if a student misses a class, the student can approach other classmates to get the required information about the class. These networks can also help motivate students to adhere to a structure in their daily routine. For example, watching a roommate wake up and get ready for class induces motivation to do the same. Students both contribute to and benefit from such networks. These frequent interactions in this social structure reinforce their identity as students as they create a sense of positive peer pressure (Riley & Burke, 1995). Hence, the campus environment helps students maintain a student role both through formal and social structures.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced students to leave campus, they physically left the student environment they had become accustomed to learning in. This environment supported their identity as a college student and facilitated the social interactions that further reinforced this identity. With no traditional lectures to attend, other academic and extracurricular activities suspended, and few opportunities for interacting with peers, students received little structural or social support to act and feel like students. Without this constant reinforcement, students' motivation and performance in this role suffered. One student stated: "Being remote also made me unmotivated because there was no social interaction. I did not feel pressure from my peers to perform well, and it showed." Another student added:

I did not prefer remote learning because it took me out of my element of being in a classroom setting.... I had decreased motivation and the tasks I had to complete felt extremely tedious despite efforts from professors to make them easier on us.

4 Role Conflict

Role conflict can undermine roles. We all partake in myriad roles, which may be independent, reinforcing, or competing. For example, the "professor" and "hobby gardener" roles may exist independently, the "professor" and "academic club sponsor" roles might reinforce each other, and the "professor" and "parent" roles might compete with each other due to time constraints. Role conflict arises when multiple roles place incompatible demands on a person (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

During the stay-at-home period, students had to not only deal with insufficient institutional and social support in their role as a student but also resume conflicting roles when they moved home. The roles assumed took different forms for different students. For some, it meant enjoying home's comforts; for others, it meant dealing with annoying siblings or inflexible household chores. For others still, it meant working extra temporary jobs for financial sustenance. During a normal academic year, these roles mostly

exist independently: both time (semester versus breaks/holiday) and space (on-campus versus at home) separate them. During the stay-at-home period, these roles conflicted, and students experienced their “worlds colliding” as these roles placed incompatible demands on them.

The collision of these worlds created numerous challenges for students. One student shared: “I have younger siblings that are never quiet, and my parents didn’t really understand that I am still a full-time student, so I had chores and responsibilities that I also had to do”. Having to maintain conflicting roles as students living at home seems to have further undermined students’ motivation for doing coursework. One student acknowledged this struggle by sharing:

Typically, when I am at my home during the school year, it is during a break, or Christmas vacation or summer break. During all of these times, I did not have homework to do, so trying to get work done in a place that is not designated in my brain [for schoolwork] was extremely challenging.

Another shared: “Once I was out of the school environment it made me feel like I was done with school”.

One student was especially aware of their conflicting identities as they shared the struggles associated with studying for finals in their childhood bedroom, which had the same decorations as it did in their high school days. Ultimately, this student chose to pack up their high school memorabilia to create a space more compatible with life as a college student.

5 Addressing Role Identity-based Challenges

Many challenges that students face in their conflicting roles when completing remote learning from home constitute issues that they and their families will need to address. To that end, instructors may consider encouraging departmental and university leadership to help prepare student homes for remote learning by providing resources to families that help them understand the challenges students face when learning from home. However, we believe that instructors can take specific measures in their course designs and policies that will help address the role identity-based challenges that students face during this time.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have noticed a need for greater flexibility in how instructors teach classes. However, student responses suggest that many professors’ attempts at offering flexibility removed important structural support for the student role while not necessarily addressing the challenges that arise from conflicting roles. Many instructors, for good reasons, relaxed course requirements during the abrupt switch to an online format. While this change may have removed some logistical difficulties that instructors faced when conducting their courses, fuzzy or less rigorous standards could have eroded the support that students felt coming from the university itself for the full-time student role. Therefore, instructors need to maintain sufficient rigor and structure in their courses, even when teaching during a pandemic, to help students still feel like students. In Sections 5.1 to 5.4, we offer some suggestions that instructors can use to provide a structure that reinforces the student role while affording students the flexibility that they need to manage their conflicting roles.

5.1 Offer Regularly Scheduled, Live Instruction

We stress that, to maintain a semblance of structure during remote learning, instructors should hold scheduled classes at university-specified times using an online video-conferencing platform, such as Zoom, and consistently deliver and organize content through a suitable learning management system (LMS). While some courses may allow instructors to offer most content asynchronously, we believe that regularly scheduled, live instruction represents the best way to reinforce the student role. Not only does such instruction provide students with set timeframes in which they need to fulfill their role as students, but it provides opportunities for them to interact with their instructors and peers in a learning environment, which helps them build necessary social networks and reinforces their student identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000).

Because virtual classes may still fall short of the in-person classroom experience, instructors can focus on engaging students in various ways so that they feel more connected to, and supported in, their student role. Instructors can incentivize students to take these online class meetings more seriously by having them do active preparatory work, such as submitting discussion questions to facilitate class conversations prior to class time. Instructors could tie a small grade percentage (e.g., participation points) to these discussion questions. Furthermore, instructors could assign students (via rotation) to help moderate class

discussion online during class periods. These opportunities could help students feel like active participants in the classroom as opposed to outside observers looking in.

5.2 Facilitate Peer Interaction

In these live meetings, instructors should not shy away from incorporating group activities as technology platforms offer the opportunity to put students in smaller breakout rooms that contain three to five students. In addition to supporting learning outcomes, we have found from our ongoing teaching experiences that these breakout rooms have a much-needed therapeutic value for students beyond simply helping them to complete group work. Assuming students continue to meet learning objectives, instructors may consider allowing them to stay in their breakout rooms for a few extra minutes during class time to allow for candid, unsupervised interactions with their peers. For some students, this time may represent the only opportunity they have to interact in such a manner with their peers. These interactions can also help students further build the social networks that support their identity as a student (Riley & Burke, 1995).

5.3 Offer Structured Flexibility

While scheduled live instruction may be the ideal, the conflicting roles students experience may make participating in these meetings difficult for some students. Therefore, instructors can achieve flexibility by allowing students to view class recordings and transcripts later on. However, we recommend adding constraints to how and by when students need to have completed asynchronous class attendance. For example, instructors could make recorded lectures available to students only for a certain timeframe (i.e., make them expire after 7 to 10 days). Also, instructors could require students attending class asynchronously to complete additional engagement exercises, such as reflection quizzes or small writing assignments. Such requirements would provide flexibility to students with legitimate conflicts while also holding them accountable for the behaviors and outcomes that affect their academic success. Such contingency plans represent an alternative structure rather than a lack of structure and, thereby, effectively offer flexibility without undermining accountability. These requirements would also disincentivize students from choosing this option as a way to skip live classes for no reason.

5.4 Provide Time-management Tools

When students have clear goals and expectations about what they need to accomplish, they can better plan their day with designated time for schoolwork. Having clearly defined time periods where they engage in their student role will help lessen the conflict that arises from competing roles. Many students shared challenges associated with not being able to find the proper balance between their schoolwork and home life because they found pacing themselves during remote learning more difficult. One student shared: "Basically having only school to focus on makes you always feel as if you should only be doing it and never giving yourself a break". Instructors can help students with time management outside scheduled class time by providing tools to impart structure to their schedule such as "pacing guides": day-by-day checklists of smaller actionable items that students can focus on in order to stay on track with course responsibilities. We provide a sample pacing guide in Figure 1. We encourage instructors to customize the guide's content to the workload that they see as appropriate for their courses and students. In many instances, simply summarizing what students should accomplish each week with important due dates and reminders may sufficiently help students more effectively pace themselves based on their unique circumstances. Whatever approach instructors take, we found that providing some time-management tools, such as checklists, to students on a weekly basis helped them manage their time outside the classroom and offered them the needed reassurance that they had not fallen behind if they stayed on track with the guide. This assurance allows them to spend meaningful time completing activities associated with competing roles without feeling like they have undermined their student role.

WEEK 1 PACING GUIDE	
MONDAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Read: Syllabus<input type="checkbox"/> Register: Website for the course<input type="checkbox"/> Download: Software needed for the course
TUESDAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Read: Textbook Chapter 1<input type="checkbox"/> Watch: Video lecture<input type="checkbox"/> Brainstorm: Discussion questions
WEDNESDAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Refine and Submit: Discussion questions<input type="checkbox"/> Complete: Exercise assigned for in-class work<input type="checkbox"/> Complete: Reading Quiz
THURSDAY	<p style="text-align: center;">ATTEND CLASS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Review: Class notes and identify problem areas
FRIDAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/> Attend: Office hours to clarify questions<input type="checkbox"/> Brainstorm: Ideas for the term project<input type="checkbox"/> Submit: Brief write-up for approval<input type="checkbox"/> Review: Content to prepare for week 2

Figure 1. Example Weekly Pacing Guide

We summarize our suggestions and their anticipated benefits in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of Potential Solutions for Role Identity-based Challenges in Remote Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Suggestion	Anticipated benefit
Maintain as much structure and rigor as circumstances will allow.	Encourages students to take their role as a student seriously and shows that the university takes this role seriously as well.
Hold regularly scheduled live instruction at university-specified times.	Provides needed structure to students' daily schedules. Provides needed interactions with instructors and peers to further strengthen the student role.
Have students actively prepare for virtual class meetings by giving them preparatory work such as submitting discussion questions for class conversation.	Increases students' engagement in virtual classes and allows the experience to more fully reinforce their student roles.
Use "breakout rooms" to facilitate group activities, and build in extra time for students to interact.	Peer interactions can reinforce the student role by fostering positive peer pressure. Peer interactions can create new relationships and bonds based on the shared role of student.
Post recorded class meetings but with exploding deadlines and additional "knowledge-check" work.	Students can reduce conflict from competing roles by being able to "attend" class asynchronously. Incentivizes students to not neglect their student responsibilities. Disincentivizes students without conflicting demands to use this resource due to the added work; attending class in person remains more lucrative.
Provide time-management tools such as pacing guides.	These tools help students plan each day and allocate sufficient time to fulfill their various roles, which reduces conflict. Further, clear daily objectives help assure students that they have made steady and timely progress, which allows them to meet the demands of competing roles without fear that they have fallen behind in their student role.

6 Conclusion

Using role identity theory to frame the challenges that students faced during remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we found the need to reinforce students' identities as students in the presence of other competing identities. We propose simple but thoughtful solutions that instructors can readily implement without adding excessive burden on them. While we will refine these solutions as we vet them through future semesters during the COVID-19 pandemic, we write this paper to help instructors mitigate the challenges in balancing competing roles by substituting role conflict with role coexistence. As George Costanza put it: "A George divided against itself, cannot stand!"

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