Teaching During COVID-19: Relational-Cultural Theory in the Online Classroom

Lucy L. Purgason[1], Dominique Hammonds[2], Geri Miller[2], Jill W. Van Horne[2], & Catherine Clark[2]

Abstract

The sudden conversion from face-to-face to online instruction in Spring semester 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented. During this time instructors in helping professional training programs were engaged in the duality of being impacted in various degrees while simultaneously training students to assist clients in dealing with the resulting stress and emotional impact. Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is a framework that can be used within online counselor education to consider the impact of the larger socio-cultural context on student learning, prioritizing fostering relational connections (Jordan, 2018). In this article, online teaching approaches aligned with the video conferencing tool, Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022), are described.

Keywords

online teaching, Relational-Cultural Theory, COVID-19, counselor education

The Spring 2020 academic semester was unprecedented in several notable ways. At a time when most students were on spring break, they abruptly learned they would not be returning to campus for the remainder of the semester. Students and instructors were engaged simultaneously in living through a health pandemic while also being expected to continue with their learning and instruction. Students and instructors quickly pivoted their expectations for the remainder of the semester as face-to-face courses moved completely online (Rapanta et al., 2020). Mere weeks later, the back-to-back murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd re-catalyzed an international movement against anti-Black racism. The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic within this social justice context were particularly poignant for students in helping professional training programs, as they were simultaneously coping with personal reactions while training to help others gain awareness of their stress response, learn strategies to cope, and deal with immediate safety fears.

In the wake of these tragedies, it was clear that students would need time and space to emotionally pro-cess. As the learning environment was now completely online, instructors were challenged to find ways to replicate the opportunity for connection students enjoyed with face-to-face instruction. Universities offered resources related to converting course content and materials to online learning platforms, yet there were fewer resources and less attention given to supporting students as they managed the emotional impact of these multi-layered and systemic traumas (Harder & McGowan, 2020). Whereas the social justice context needs to be considered as both immensely important and a contributing factor to the emotional intensity experienced by students, this article will focus primarily on the impact of COVID-19. At a time when instructors most wanted to connect with students to help process their emotions, constraints of synchronous technology platforms, such as Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Incorporated [Zoom], 2022), resulted in challenges reading the emotions of students and the class (Rapanta et al., 2020) Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) (Jordan, 2018) can be used within online counselor education instruction as a framework to consider the impact of the larger

1 Oregon State University - Cascades
2 Appalachian State University

Corresponding Author: Lucy L.Purgason, Oregon State University - Cascades 1500 SW Chandler Ave, Bend, OR 97702. Email: purgasonll@appstate.edu

socio-cultural context on student learning. In addition, the key concepts within RCT offer instructors a consideration for how to incorporate the collective experiences of students and instructors as a result of COVID-19 within the virtual Zoom classroom. RCT (2018) explicitly addresses issues of social context, including power and privilege and the social location of instructors and students, critical areas to consider while teaching during the pandemic. For example, it is important to recognize that many students enrolled in helping professional training programs may already have prior exposure to trauma and the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic likely could be re-traumatizing and triggering (Butler et al., 2018). Utilizing RCT as a framework when teaching on Zoom, prompts instructors to consider how the online environment has the potential to further isolate and disconnect students who may need and desire connection the most. For example, the pandemic forcing a shift to online learning may have stirred or enhanced previous trauma experiences in terms of students experiencing powerlessness, isolation, and loneliness.

The purpose of this manuscript is to introduce RCT as a framework for counselor education instructors to intentionally cultivate connections virtually using the online platform, Zoom. The tenets of RCT (Jordan, 2018) provide philosophical guidance to instructors when developing and using online approaches and techniques via Zoom to re-create the sense of community online historically built face-to-face. Within this manuscript, an overview of RCT (2018) is provided, teaching strategies aligned with RCT utilized via Zoom are described, and key considerations and implications for using these approaches virtually are discussed.

Literature Review

Online Counselor Education Teaching Pedagogy

The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Teaching Initiative Task Force compiled the Best Practices in Teaching in Counselor Education document (ACES, 2016) highlighting several learning theories appropriate to counselor education. Within the Best Practices document, Section 5 covers teaching online, with authors acknowledging a dearth of scholarship devoted to this area in counselor education (ACES, 2016). Scholars attribute this gap, in part, to the high value counselor educators place on relationships and the challenges perceived in developing them in an online context (Hall et al., 2010). Within this section characteristics of instructors teaching online were offered (i.e., organized, encouraging, creative, respectful, humorous, supportive) summarizing that, "instructor presence and quality of interaction has a vital role in the student learning experience of an online classroom" (p. 51). Learning activities and platforms to engage in the type of active, experiential learning covered in the first sections are provided along with considerations for diverse learners.

Reviews of online pedagogy within counselor education offer best practice recommendations for educators (Snow & Coker, 2020; Wasik et al., 2019). Several recommendations narrow in on course design considerations, such as how to achieve objectives related to transferring course content from a face-to-face to virtual modality (Snow & Coker, 2020). Relationship building suggestions within the virtual environment tend to be limited to considerations for activities contained within the footprint of the academic course (e.g., introductory activities) and on frequency of communication (e.g., providing feedback on assignments, making announcements, checking comprehension of material) versus the depth and nature of communication that may be applicable when addressing emotional processing and facilitating dialogue when a large-scale trauma or crisis event(s) occurs (Wasik et al., 2019).

Whereas there is not an endorsed online teaching model for counselor educators, there are frameworks within online learning that may be of value to counselor education. An example of such a framework is engagement theory (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998). The emphasis in engagement theory is on how technology can facilitate authentic connection between students, making use of technology features to create a learning environment where students are able to collaborate and connect with one another, the learning material, and its application. Rather than merely focusing on how technology can be used to disseminate course content, instructors using engagement theory might explore how virtual learning tools can also be used to foster authentic engagement in the virtual classroom (Kearsley & Schneiderman, 1998).

The Use of Zoom as an Online Instruction Tool

During the shift to virtual learning because of COVID-19, many colleges and universities elected to use Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) as their online learning platform (Garris et al., 2022). Zoom (2022) is a video-conferencing tool containing features that, according to the site, are designed to increase online meeting engagement and interaction. Although the exact number of universities and colleges utilizing the platform is unknown, a blog article on the Zoom (2013) site indicates that 700 colleges and universities have subscriptions, a number that is likely much higher today. According to Zoom, there are several site tools that can help facilitate educators' transition to remote learning (La Morte, 2022). These tools include the capability to make a virtual seating chart using the gallery view, a focus mode allowing instructors to see all students if their camera is on but only the instructor's camera is visible to students, and advanced polling and quizzing

features. In addition to these tools, instructors can assign break-out rooms permitting students to connect with one another in smaller groups, including a self-select break-out room feature where students can move back and forth between rooms (Montgomery, 2020). To further facilitate communication, meeting participants can communicate to the instructor and peers using the chat feature and reaction icons such as emojis.

Research on the effectiveness of Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) as a learning tool in higher education is just emerging. To identify best practices for using Zoom in higher education, Krome (2021) conducted a literature review and located 32 articles meeting the search criteria (i.e., Zoom, higher education) in the year that the pandemic started. A portion of the articles contained best practice teaching recommendations. Many of the suggestions related to increasing instructor and student familiarity with the platform and a consideration for students' ability to access Zoom. Specific teaching strategies when using Zoom (2022) were limited to considerations for using Zoom to facilitate a flipped classroom; however, one of the 32 articles was focused on culturally responsive pedagogy in virtual instruction. Key considerations from these authors included gaining knowledge and awareness of students' experiences, demonstrating care for students during the pandemic, and avoiding isolating students of color (Smith, 2020).

Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) can be utilized for synchronous and asynchronous instruction; however, scholars have recommended that educators who want to maximize student engagement and connection with peers utilize Zoom (2022) for active, experiential activities versus lecturing or didactic instruction (Garris et al., 2022). In a qualitative investigation with college students, students reported that instructors who used break-out rooms for discussion/activities were considered more effective (Garris et al., 2022). Participants cited one benefit of break-out rooms was connecting with other students. In addition, students appreciated that virtual instruction via Zoom provided them a chance to see a more personable side to their instructors (Garris et al., 2022). Facilitating authentic engagement via Zoom (2022) was noted by other scholars as an important consideration for students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee et al., 2021). Further, attending to students' social-emotional well-being via Zoom (2022) is recommended; however, fewer specific strategies for ways this can be facilitated during remote instruction exist (Garris et al., 2022). Suggestions for how to develop connections within the virtual learning environment may help fulfill this gap.

Relational Cultural Theory
RCT, a feminist theory approach, arose in the 1970s and emerged as a response to growth models that emphasized growth through separation and individuation (Jordan, 2018). RCT emphasizes growth occurring through connection rather than isolation, a paradigm that is more demonstrative of the experiences of women and many individuals of color. Connection, through the lens of RCT (2018), results in several positive outcomes including energy, empowerment, sense of worth, clarity, and a desire for greater connection (Jordan, 2010). Conversely, disconnection, experienced through the result of negative relational images (i.e., pictures we have of ourselves in relationships established early in life) or conflict, can lead to reduced energy, helplessness, confusion, reduced feelings of worth, and isolation (Jordan, 2010). Technology inherently can encourage and facilitate disconnection through the reduction of information that is gathered through reading nonverbal behavior and inability to be in the physical presence of one another (Rapanta et al., 2020). Such enhanced disconnection can result in relational struggles between instructors and students and between students and one another. Intentional relational strategies delivered online can encourage a sense of community and dialogue resulting in relationship building that can heal relational struggles and enhance connection between instructors and students. Three concepts associated with RCT include relational awareness, mutual empathy, and authenticity (Jordan, 2018).

Relational awareness. Relational awareness includes attentiveness to each individual in the relationship and the dynamics of the relationship itself (Jordan, 2018). Relational awareness involves identifying key relational images that provide a schema for the self in relation to others. In the classroom students' relational images may impact their sense of safety and trust with the instructor. An example of this is an instructor needing to be aware of how they communicate their presence online (e.g., explaining nonverbal actions such as not looking into the camera to monitor student reactions) as well as checking out assumptions about how students communicate online (e.g., why students have a blank screen showing rather than their face).

Mutual empathy. Mutual empathy involves being impacted by the emotional sharing of another (Jordan, 2018). It is not reflective of the other individual feeling empathy towards the other, rather it is acknowledging the deep emotional response an individual is having to what the other individual is conveying. Mutual empathy is key to developing growth-fostering connections because generating a caring response in another reduces feelings of isolation (Jordan, 2018). Anticipatory empathy is a form of mutual empathy allowing an individual to use knowledge of the other individual in context to validate what that individual may be experiencing because of the larger macro-culture (Walker,

2010). Members of cultural groups may feel discomfort initiating conversations about difficult experiences due to feelings of shame or fear that their experience will be minimized, devalued, or ignored (Walker, 2010). An instructor should maintain sensitivity to the COVID-19 issues facing students (e.g., health concerns, financial problems, lack of technology) and shame or fears related to raising such concerns online that does not permit informal, personal, individual contact with the instructor.

Authenticity. Authenticity involves shared vulnerability, making yourself known to another through purposeful and intentional disclosure aimed at facilitating the connection in the relationship (Jordan, 2018). Within the classroom, it is important to be mindful of power dynamics that can impact the relationship between instructor and student. Utilizing knowledge of power differentials when making the decision to disclose information to students is important because there are differing consequences for disclosures based on privilege (Fox, 1997; Ruiz, 2012). When facilitating dialogue, instructors should remember that students have the right to retain autonomy on what they choose to share so that instructors are not engaging in "power-over" relationships (Jordan, 2010) with students. There are differing consequences for instructors when they share struggles brought about by COVID-19 and those experienced by students. Instructors hold an evaluative position and students may fear that sharing about challenges coping with anxiety, depression, and loneliness because of quarantine may impact ratings related to professional dispositions and gatekeeping assessment.

RCT (Jordan, 2018) is an approach that provides a framework for understanding how socio-cultural-historical forces impact the curricular landscape. For example, counselor educators have recommended the use of RCT (2018) to enhance the learning experiences of counselors in training by strengthening the connections between instructors and students (Lertora et al., 2019) and to enhance students' clinical skills by integrating multicultural skill development within micro-skills training (Hall et al., 2014). Authors have expounded on ways to integrate RCT into several facets of counselor education including curriculum (Duffey, 2007; Hall et al., 2014), supervision (Lenz, 2014), advising (Purgason et al., 2016), and study abroad experiences (Avent Harris et al., 2019). To date, a consideration of RCT (2018) within counselor education has focused primarily on face-to-face interactions and not explicitly addressed incorporation of RCT in the online teaching environment. This article focuses on the facilitation of relational learning experiences online via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) by presenting teaching examples aligned with the key tenets of RCT (2018).

Strategies for Incorporating RCT in the

Zoom Classroom
Relational Awareness
RCT (Jordan, 2018) research indicates that increased relational quality results in decreased distress (Frey, 2013). Acknowledgement of students and instructors' intersecting social and cultural identities is critical when entering the online environment during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Comstock and colleagues (2008) captured how RCT can be used to honor individual experiences and deepen the relationship highlighting the importance of, "awareness and knowledge of the ways in which cultural oppression, marginalization, and various forms of social injustice lead to feelings of isolation, shame, and humiliation among persons from devalued groups" (p. 280). Instructors hold a position of power as they create a space to acknowledge, hold, and process student experiences. In contrast, instructors can devalue, silence, and isolate students by failing to bring this into the classroom, potentially serving as a point of disconnection for students.

Validating and incorporating students' cultural contexts is critical to embodying the RCT (Jordan, 2018) concept of relational awareness. Counselor education programs are in distinct geographical regions of the United States, with many online programs serving students residing in different states. As a result, students encompass a variety of living situations important to consider during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students were themselves directly impacted or living with family members that were directly impacted by the virus. Health impacts may have occurred due to physical exposure, vocational or employment impacts because of loss of employment or fear of exposure due to front-line work, or emotional stress brought on by the interaction of these impacts. In addition, some students were living in areas of the country that were experiencing daily protests of police brutality and systemic racial injustice. Further, some students experienced inequitable access to the Internet based on living in a rural location or urban area where Wi-Fi was unstable based on higher numbers of users.

Instructors demonstrating relational awareness recognize the importance of modeling for students how they are processing the emotional weight of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, it acknowledges the differential impacts based on the individual backgrounds of students, instructors, and their unique challenges. This collective experience may have blurred the boundaries typically constructed between instructor and student, necessitating the need to possess clarity on the nature and depth of personal disclosures related to the pandemics, yet also prioritizing the need to address these topics in the classroom. Several strategies can be used via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) to create a space to

affirm student experiences. As instruction moved on-line, previous boundaries and distinctions between home and the learning environment were removed. This posed a new challenge as the home environment now also served as the learning environment. The collapse of these two previously separate contexts into one served to potentially elevate and/or marginalize elements of students' learning settings. In order to facilitate an environment for learning, an important first step is to acknowledge the circumstances and challenges experienced. One of the hallmarks of this process is to acknowledge students' physical locations and provide an opportunity for students to talk about the challenges that this created and, in some cases, the strengths of these new learning environments. Instructors may consider moving away from encouraging students to sterilize their environments in support of a more formal, professional atmosphere and instead elect to intentionally invite or provide space via Zoom (2022) to meet or interact with students' partners, family members, roommates, children, and pets. An extension of this might be to invite students to select an item from their home environment that represents how they are feeling about virtual learning during the pandemic and showcase this item in their Zoom (2022) screen. In this way, rather than compartmentalizing the learning and home environment there is acknowledgement that these contexts are now collapsed into one context.

Another way to facilitate relational connection is to build opportunities for small group engagement using breakout rooms. In a large Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) room students may perceive an extra barrier to communication, whereas, forming intentional small groups works against this perception of isolation. Meaningful connection for students can be facilitated through structured activities and discussion questions. These small group interactions are not only beneficial for student-to-student connection, but also can benefit instructor-to-student connection by allowing the instructor to connect with 4-5 students at a time. Additionally, the instructor can design an activity where each break-out room group works on one aspect of an assignment. Then, the small break-out groups not only serve to facilitate connection between members of that group but also provide a pedagogical opportunity through a constructivist framework to demonstrate the importance of each group's contribution to the whole.

One way to increase relational awareness in the Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) classroom is to decide as a group the expectations for behavioral engagement. Awareness of the variations in which students and instructors may need to connect within the pandemic context respects and prioritizes an individual's control in that process. Instead of labeling a student who chooses to have their camera off as disconnected or not paying attention, a consideration can be given to the student choosing to have their camera off so that they can pay attention. Instructors could consider that there are other ways to facilitate engagement and participation when students elect to attend with their camera off. For example, students can be encouraged to participate using the Zoom (2022) icons and emojis to indicate their reactions to group discussions or course content.

Relational awareness can foster student autonomy during a time in which many of their personal choices are compromised by offering students options to exercise control when able. Instructors may want to reflect on assignment requirements and identify ways moving online might change the nature of student behaviors and interactions with one another and the instructor. Questions to guide this reflection include, "What is essential for my students to walk away with at the end of the course? How can I thoughtfully balance my expectations with student preference and energy resources? How can I maximize flexibility while also preserving academic rigor?" Instructors can include an opportunity for the class to vote on assignment modifications using the Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) polling feature. Student-led decisions as voted on through the Zoom tool preserve student autonomy while maintaining the academic integrity and rigor of the course. Another way to increase student autonomy is for instructors to use the Zoom (2022) recording feature so that students can view course content at a time that is convenient for students whose routines and responsibilities shifted due to COVID-19.

Mutual Empathy
The concept of mutual empathy helps instructors prioritize the space given to processing and holding space for students' emotions in the wake of current events and avoid disconnection with students by failing to acknowledge and respond to the emotional weight of the pandemic on their lives. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many individuals having a reduced capacity to respond to day-to-day events due to experiencing fear, apprehension, and anxiety. Instructors may find it difficult to balance the paradoxical student need for flexibility with the strong desire and preference for specificity in course expectations, grading, due dates, etc. given the uncertainty they were facing across multiple arenas. Instructors can lean on their empathy skills (e.g., acknowledgment, naming, processing, linking) and reassure students that their reactions are a normal human response to uncertainty rather than being reflective of individual deficits. The above practice is important in avoiding recapitulating trauma by situating students' emotional reactions within the larger socio-cultural-political context and giving them permission to

respond in a human way within the academic context. This may be particularly important for Students of Color or from marginalized backgrounds who may have had repeated experiences of systemic practices that undermine, devalue, and ignore how their experiences may be uniquely challenging within the current context.

In the Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) environment, unlike the face-to-face classroom, an instructor might elect to respond to student disclosures using the chat feature so that the student does not feel singled out in front of their peers. The use of chat messaging in these instances may be particularly advantageous because information can be shared with sensitivity to the group context. This may be especially important when information is shared that is unique to the experiences of one cultural group. Given these potentially sensitive disclosures, instructors may want to invite students to use the chat feature to share privately, sharing and connecting with the instructor within a low stakes environment. In this way they can share their perspectives, but also can preserve and scaffold vulnerability in responding.

Staying attuned to the ways that students are presenting in class helps maintain relational awareness and prevent occurrences of disconnection. Students experienced a range of emotions and reactions to both the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to online learning. Some students appeared more engaged in class, utilizing class time as an opportunity to immerse in a structured activity during the quarantine period. Others appeared tired and had difficulty concentrating, with some openly expressing frustration with attending class virtually. Rather than ignoring these experiences, finding ways to routinely address students' emotional states through routine check-ins is important. While a group check-in is a basic relationship-building tool, particularly in times of stress, strain, or trauma, it is important to emphasize students' humanness and individuality. Such emphasis encourages dialogue within the experience of community. Instructors may want to implement "people check-ins" and then "professional check-ins", before transitioning to current material. This may help students manage their emotional arousal and more immediate needs, allowing them a safe container to process within the instructional context, freeing up space to pay attention to course content. Using the draw feature in Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022), an instructor could create a scale and ask students to place a hash mark on the scale indicating where they are feeling. Instructors could use creativity when deciding on what the ends of the scale might represent. Alternatively, students can be directed to use the Zoom (2022) chat function to select one word to capture how they are currently feeling. After each student shares their word, collectively the class can reflect on the emotions experienced by the group creating a collective class experience of sharing.

Conveying mutual empathy across the Zoom video-platform is perhaps one of the ways that online communication most inhibits offering understanding and sensitivity to students' experiences because it is more difficult to observe and respond to student emotions due to Internet lag time or the inability to gain physical proximity to students to express support. To convey mutual empathy to students via Zoom (2022) instructors can intentionally create opportunities to connect one-on-one with students to better understand individual experiences and demonstrate responsiveness. These individual Zoom meetings can include reflective prompts to help facilitate dialogue. For example, a question posed might be, "How do you have hope right now?"

Intentionality in course planning may also be required to give room in class to attend to major events happening during the semester. Embedding self-care days within the footprint of the syllabus provides students choice in engaging in days throughout the semester where there are less expectations around formalized Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) participation, with the encouragement that this time can be spent in self-identified wellness and self-care activities. For example, many instructors had classes on election day or the day after. Using anticipatory empathy, an instructor might opt to give students the choice of attending class the day after a major event such as an election. Those choosing to attend could have opportunities for self-care and mindfulness and time afterwards for processing.

The activities described above are all instructor led. Students may desire opportunities to facilitate conversations with each other. The move to online learning inhibited students' ability to connect with one another informally through interactions before and after class and during breaks. Intentionally opening the Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) rooms early and scheduling snack and meal breaks via Zoom breakout rooms can be utilized to provide students time to talk with one another, catch up, and engage in community building.

Authenticity
Authenticity can be demonstrated by recognizing an instructor's social presence in the Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) classroom. Instructors can model for students how to talk about and process what they are experiencing, recognizing that the instructor has the leadership position in the classroom to create a space for this type of sharing to occur. Addressing individual privileges with students is a critical part of embracing an RCT approach when engaging in these conversations. As such, leading the conversation

by acknowledging instructor areas of privilege, models for students an awareness of how the instructor's identity lenses shape not only their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic but also their reactions and perceived safety. The impact of current events, and a willingness to engage in dialogue on these events, differs based on student identities, level of self-awareness, and comfort with the group. Preparing students for the conversations that would occur and offering choice, when able, for engaging in discussions in the classroom is important. For example, an instructor might elect to create optional Zoom (2022) spaces for conversation before class for students to process events giving students autonomy on whether they wished to participate.

Just as the students need space to express their challenges, instructors may also experience difficulties navigating the online classroom and personal reactions to the pandemics. Another way to maximize authenticity, is for instructors to disclose, as appropriate, their own challenges when moving online. It is not uncommon for students to appear tired or lethargic during synchronous Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) meetings. An instructor might express to the class the difficulty in maintaining their energy level teaching when students have a difficult time reciprocating, recognizing the very real demands on student concentration while also wanting to maintain an engaged and participatory online classroom. This type of disclosure may allow students permission to share their own tensions and then engage in a collaborative discussion about how to try and maintain attention and energy within the Zoom (2022) classroom. Ideas included engaging in a welcoming ritual to enter the Zoom classroom by making sure to take centering breaths, locate water and snacks for availability during the synchronous session, and reviewing the class agenda and timeline including designated breaks.

Authenticity is an important tool to understand challenges encountered by students as a result of their unique identities, and their intersection, and explore experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and oppression. One of the ways authenticity can be modeled by instructors is to use transparency about a desire to acknowledge and honor the social justice events happening while not knowing the best way to bring that into the classroom. Disclosing to students the instructor's uncertainty demonstrates vulnerability with students and positions them less as an all-knowing expert and more as an individual committed to growth and embracing areas where more training and development are needed.

Discussion and Considerations

The purpose of this manuscript is to offer instructors specific strategies for building connections with students virtually, filling a gap in the existing online in-

struction literature by focusing on how technology can be intentionally utilized to foster relationship development. RCT (Jordan, 2018) provides an empirical and culturally informed framework for which to facilitate relational connection between the students and instructor and the students and each other. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of anxiety and depression rose in college students brought on by factors such as decreased social connection and increased worry about academic performance (Son et al., 2020). Instructors are uniquely positioned to facilitate connection and reduce isolation within their classrooms.

In 2022 and beyond, much can be learned from the experiences of instructors during COVID-19 who were forced to quickly transition their courses online in an effort to reduce disruption to student learning as much as possible. Due to this emergent and immediate need, much of the focus was on the transition of course content to a virtual learning platform with less consideration for students' relational needs. Whereas intentionality in course structure is important in virtual course design, so too is the consideration for course context in regard to online environmental features that support student engagement and connection. Learning from a constructivist framework is never void of the interpersonal connections between the learner and instructor and the learner and other learners. Mutual empathy, relational awareness, and authenticity are essential building blocks to creating relationships with students, especially during a time when students are experiencing large-scale disconnection. These RCT-based relational strategies are offered as descriptions of what online instructors may use to help transition classes virtually during the current COVID-19 context. The techniques and suggestions contained within this article may look different depending on the instructor who is facilitating. Instructors enter the classroom with their own positionalities and ways of fostering relational connection. Instructors can serve as models for which to bring their humanness into the classroom, a process which values the unique interplay of instructor personhood and the embodiment of these strategies. Thus, customization of these strategies may be necessary in support of an instructor's unique relational style.

Integration of RCT (Jordan, 2018) in the online classroom requires instructors to engage in critical self-reflection particularly around structural inequality and inequity. For example, ongoing discussion at the program level of how online learning has privileged and marginalized students based on identity factors would be important. A discussion about how students show up online (e.g., muted video) needs to incorporate considerations for external factors that may be present that are contributing to the student making this decision. Such factors include lack of access to high-speed In-

ternet, lack of access to a private space to learn, or discomfort around showing their home environment. An awareness of these factors can prompt instructors to engage in intentional preparation for how to incorporate these considerations into course planning and for consideration when engaging in relationship building via Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022).

The RCT-based strategies featured in the manuscript are based on the use of Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) for synchronous instruction. An opportunity exists for scholars to consider how the relational tenets described in this article might be applied to asynchronous instruction. Further, the strategies outlined did not distinguish between the use in content versus field experience courses. An area of further inquiry may be determining differences in application of these strategies in supervision-related courses. In addition, the strategies presented are not empirically validated. Qualitative research with counselor education graduate students on their perspectives of the use of these techniques would provide data on their effectiveness. Finally, the RCT-based online teaching strategies outlined in this article arose as a response to contextual circumstances driving the need to integrate relational concepts in the online classroom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For programs traditionally offering courses in a face-to-face format, a future need may still exist for course delivery online due to other extraneous factors (e.g., natural disasters, future pandemics, declining on campus enrollments); however, it is unknown how the strategies may be adapted outside of the COVID-19 context.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to introduce the use of RCT (Jordan, 2018) as a framework for facilitating relational connection in the virtual classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic. Creating opportunities to establish growth-fostering virtual relationships is an important consideration when transitioning courses online. Beyond the delivery of course content, instructors should also consider how Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2022) can be used to foster relationship development in the online environment. RCT (2018) provides a promising framework for instructors to utilize when intentionally planning ways to foster connection and enhance relationship development in the Zoom (2022) classroom, an important consideration during a time when students are experiencing significant disconnection and isolation.

References

ACES Teaching Initiative Taskforce. (2016). Best practices in teaching in counselor education report 2016. http://www.acesonline.net/resources/aces-teaching-initiative-taskforce- report-october-2016

Avent Harris, J. R., Dietz, S. S., & Crumb, L. (2019). Relational Cultural Theory: A guiding framework for study abroad experiences. Teaching and Supervision in Counseling, 1(2), 113-126. https://doi.org/10.7290/tsc010208

Butler, L. D., Maguin, E., & Carello, J. (2018). Retraumatization mediates the effect of adverse childhood experiences on clinical-training related secondary traumatic stress symptoms. Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, 1, 25-38 https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2017.1304488

Comstock, D. L., Hammer, T. R., Strentzsch, J., Cannon, K., Parsons,J., & Salazar, G., Jr. (2008). Relational-cultural theory: A framework for bridging relational, multicultural,
and social justice competencies. Journal of Counseling & Development, 86, 279–287. https://doi:10.1002.j.1556-6678.2008.tb00510.x

Duffey, T. (2007). Promoting relational competencies in counselor education through creativity and relational-cultural theory. Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 2(1), 47-59. https://doi.org/10.1300/J456v02n01_05

Fox, C. (1997). The authenticity of intercultural communication. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 21, 85–103. https://doi:10.1016/S0147-1767(96)00012-0

Frey, L. L. (2013). Relational-cultural therapy: Theory, research, and application to counseling competencies. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 44, 177–185. https://doi:10.1037/a0033121

Garris, B., Novotny, B. A., & Kwangman, K. (2022). Conveying positive regard in distance courses: Lights, camera, action: A focus group study exploring university students' experiences of learning via Zoom. Journal of Educators Online, 19(1), 81-93. https://www.thejeo.com/archive/2022_19_1/garris_novotny_ko

Hall, B., Nielsen, R., Nelson, J., & Buchholz, C. E. (2010). A humanistic framework for distance education. Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development, 49(1), 45-57. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1939.2010.tb00086.x

Hall, K. G., Barden, S., & Conley, A. (2014). A relational-cultural framework: Emphasizing relational dynamics and multicultural skill development. Professional Counselor, 4 (1), 71-83. https://doi:10.15241/kgh.4.1.71

Harder, W. L., & McGowan, B. L. (2020). Recognizing COVID-19 as trauma: Considerations for student affairs educators and faculty developers. ACPA

Developments, 3. https://developments.myacpa. org/recognizing-covid-19-as-trauma-considerations-for-student-affairs-educators-and-faculty-developers/

Jordan, J. V. (2018). Relational-cultural therapy (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Jordan, J.V. (2010). Recent developments in Relational-Cultural Theory. In J. V. Jordan (Ed.), The power of connection: Recent developments in Relational-Cultural Theory (pp.1-4). Routledge.

Kearsley, G., & Schneiderman, B. (1998). Engagement theory: A framework for technology-based teaching and learning. Educational Technology, 38(5), 20-23. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44428478

Krome, L. R. (2021). A review of Zoom utilization in higher education during the COVID-19   pandemic. Education Thinking, 1(1), 11-26.

La Morte, P. (2022, January 7). Going back to online learning? Features designed for your virtual classroom. Zoom. https://blog.zoom.us/online-learning-virtual-classroom-features/

Lee, A. Y., Moskowitz-Sweet, G., Pelavin, E., Rivera, O., & Hancock, J. T. (2021). "Bringing you into the Zoom": The power of authentic engagement in a time of crisis in the U.S. Journal of Children and Media, 15(1), 91-95. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2020.1858437

Lenz, A. S. (2014). Integrating relational-cultural theory concepts into supervision. Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 9(1), 3-18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2013.864960

Lertora, I. M., Croffie, A., Dorn-Medeiros, C., & Christensen, J. (2019). Using relational-cultural theory as a pedagogical approach for counselor education. Journal of Creativity in
Mental Health, 15(2), 265-276. https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2019.1687059

Montgomery, J. (2020, September 29). All you need to know about using Zoom breakout rooms. Zoom. https://blog.zoom.us/using-zoom-breakout-rooms/

Purgason, L. L., Avent, J. R., Cashwell, C. C., Jordan, M. E., & Reese, R. F. (2016). Culturally relevant advising: Applying relational-cultural theory in counselor education. Journal of Counseling & Development, 94(4), 429-436. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12101

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2020). Online university teaching during and after the COVID-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity. Postdigital Science and Education, 2, 923-945. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-   020-00155-y

Ruiz, E. (2012). Understanding Latina immigrants using relational cultural theory. Women & Therapy, 35, 68–79. https://doi:10.1080/02703149.2012.634727

Smith, J. M. (2020). Practice what you preach: Culturally responsive pedagogy during Covid19. Issues in Teacher Education, 29(1), 23-34. https://library.semo.edu:2443/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarlyjournals/pratice-what-you-preach-culturally-responsive/docview/2478108483/se2?accountid=38003

Snow, W. H., & Coker, J. K. (2020). Distance counselor education: Past, present, future. The Professional Counselor, 10(1), 40-56. https://doi:10.15241/whs.10.1.40

Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. Journal of Medical Internet research, 22(9), e21279. https://doi.org/10.2196/21279

Walker, M. (2010). How therapy helps when the culture hurts. In J. V. Jordan (Ed.), The power of connection: Recent developments in Relational-Cultural Theory (pp.84-102). Routledge.

Zoom Video Communications, Incorporated. (2013, July 15). Over 700 colleges and universities now use Zoom. https://blog.zoom.us/over-700-universities-and-colleges-now-use -zoom-video-conferencing

Zoom Video Communications, Incorporated. (2022). Zoom desktop client. (Version 5.11.1)
[Computer software]. https://zoom.us/

Zoom Video Communications, Incorporated. (2022). More than just meetings. https://zoom.us/