The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology

Volume 16
Issue 2 *Teaching Sociology in Challenging Times*

Article 3

5-16-2024

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Ellis S. Logan
Valdosta State University, eslogan@valdosta.edu

Brandon Atkins
Valdosta Sate University, jbatkins@valdosta.edu

Anne M. Price
Valdosta State University, annprice@valdosta.edu

Recommended Citation

Logan, Ellis S.; Atkins, Brandon; and Price, Anne M. (2024) "Lemons to Lemonade: Educational Modifications During the COVID-19 Pandemic and their Utility Moving Forward," *The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 3.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62915/2154-8935.1187
Available at: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jpps/vol16/iss2/3

The Journal of Public and Professional Sociology
Special Issue Teaching Sociology in Challenging Times, Volume 16, Issue 2

Lemons to Lemonade: Educational Modifications During the COVID-19 Pandemic and their Utility Moving Forward

Ellis S. Logan, *Valdosta State University*
Brandon Atkins, *Valdosta State University*
Anne M. Price, *Valdosta State University*

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated changes across social institutions, including education. This case study outlines specific innovations using five cases of pedagogical developments made by social science faculty members at a public university, and their utility for undergraduate students in a post-pandemic world. These innovations relate specifically to office hour scheduling, class assignment reminders, building informal class support groups, experiential learning, and virtual paper submission and evaluation. For each case, we outline the implementation procedure, evaluate its effectiveness, and discuss the benefits. We argue that these methods, forged during "challenging times", will help improve students' experiences and success during their time in college, and benefit instructors in higher education in a variety of ways.

Keywords: COVID-19, pedagogy, innovations, student success

Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic impacted virtually all social institutions, including the workplace (Kniffin and Narayanan, 2021), legal systems (Byrom et al., 2020), religion (Bryson et al., 2020), and the family (Browne et al., 2021). The institution of education was also impacted by the pandemic as major adjustments to educational delivery systems were needed (Hoofman and Secord, 2021). Like educators nationwide, those in higher education were forced to adjust their pedagogy, material delivery systems, mentorship strategies, and approaches to student research. There are many historical examples of human adaptations owing to systemic changes from nutritional stressors (Stini, 1979), economic crises (Oriol and Miralles-Guasch, 2018), and political upheaval (Carpenter, 2008); this has also been the case for the COVID-19 pandemic. Before widespread vaccine availability in the U.S., people used many strategies including masking in public places, physical distancing, placing hand sanitizer stations, and moving forms of social interaction (meetings, religious services, social gatherings, etc.) to virtual forums. During these extraordinary times, faculty in higher education developed highly creative and effective methods to continue the mission of education within the

confines of a global pandemic. This case study will describe five specific technology-based instructional innovations utilized by three social science professors at a public regional comprehensive university in the Southern United States during the pandemic, all of which have utility beyond extraordinary times. Each of these five cases will be explained by the instructor who implemented it, and their experiences and evaluations.

Specific Practices

Utilizing Online Platforms to Schedule Office Hours

Case Number One: Calendly

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of indoor masking and physical distancing policies, plans to return to face-to-face classes had to consider physical space and close contact between students, faculty, and staff in ways that had been given little to no attention previously. My university offered a variety of innovative class modalities to adapt to physical distancing requirements in the classroom but did not offer specific guidance regarding student meetings. Student office meetings provide valuable one-on-one support, boosts student success (Gallego, 1995), and are as effective virtually as in-person (Chen et al., 2021). Following the practices at my university, I offered students the option of meeting for office hours online using my university's virtual platform, or in-person abiding by physical distancing guidelines.

One issue I had initially overlooked was the traffic, both in my office and in my email inbox. I teach mostly upper-division courses and, accordingly, have many student meetings during office hours. Once early in the Fall 2021 semester (the first semester my university returned to on-campus learning), I had several students arrive at my office regarding a homework assignment within approximately ten minutes. Considering my office is under 100 square feet in size and given university protocol of maintaining six-feet of distance in indoor spaces, I could only safely accommodate one student in my office at a time. Furthermore, students requesting to meet online would email during office hours to connect to the virtual platform, which also would overlap; once early in the same semester I had three students email me over a one-hour period during office hours, only two of whom I could connect with that day.

Considering these unforeseen complications, I adjusted my office hour policy to create more orderliness and structure for student meetings. Specifically, I posted an announcement on the course management website the preceding Friday announcing "office hour sign-ups" for the upcoming week. The announcement linked a platform where students could select a timeslot within my office hours, notifying me via email and closing the timeslot. To collect these responses, I used Calendly, a scheduling software that synchronizes directly to an email account (Calendly.com).[1] Like many, I use Google Calendar for my professional scheduling, but I like to keep my office hour scheduling separate from my main work

[1] Many will be familiar with Doodle which can be used similarly, though it does not have as many functions in the freeware version as Calendly.

calendar. Creating an account is free, and though I will outline the basic functions, there are more than are described.

After creating an account with an email address, users are prompted to "set your availability," where the instructor can enter their office hours, times, and dates, though this can be edited later. Once on the home screen, users can create an event by selecting "new event type", I use "one-on-one" for office hours, but several types of events are offered. After selecting the event type, the user is prompted to enter a name for the event and enter instructions; I request two details, whether the student wants to meet in-person or virtually, and a brief description of the meeting's intent (in the syllabus, I give examples like "homework help" or "improving my paper"). The user then can select the duration of the meetings (15-minute increments), the deadline to request a time, and any "buffer time" before or after meetings to prepare. Lastly, users can amend the hours discretely for weeks with departmental meetings, professional conferences, or other instances requiring modifications. At the bottom of the options page is a tab for "additional rules for your availability." I allow students to select only a single time slot per week. Should they want more time, students may email me directly on their meeting day and request times that have not been taken adjacent to their meeting. I post this link to the announcements on the course management site, though instructors should discuss the best dissemination method with their students. When students click the link, they are offered the available time slots, and an email is sent to both their inbox and mine, which I can add to my calendar. Calendly also allows users to view scheduled events directly on the home screen (Calendly.com).

This practice helped me avert traffic jams at my office and in my inbox when physical distancing and virtual appointments were requisite. Somewhat unintentionally, it improved the organization of my meetings and fostered professional practice among my students. With this model, meetings about classwork are more constructive as students must request meetings in advance and identify topics of discussion. I, too, can plan more effectively by opening students' assignments on course management site prior to and during the meeting. Lastly, this practice allows students to have an equal opportunity to schedule meetings and ensures that time is used effectively. With no more lines at the office door or last-minute student emails requesting appointments, office hours are more efficient and effective for the instructor and their students.

Adapting to Virtual Learning: How the Remind App was Utilized for College Courses During the Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond

Case Number Two: Remind

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities quickly shifted face-to-face courses to an online format. Many students and instructors found this transition challenging. I knew I would need to maintain consistent and timely communication with students to keep courses on schedule and ease the transition to an online format. Initially, I was only using the university email to keep students informed of important information, such as posted readings, assignment due dates, and changes to the course. However, many students were not

checking their email frequently enough, leading to incomplete or missing assignments. To overcome this communication challenge with students, I decided to try Remind. I was familiar with Remind as many K-12 schools in my area have used it for several years to quickly disseminate important information to students and parents.

Remind is a free communication tool designed to help instructors reach students instantly via text message (Remind, 2023). Remind is easy to use, even for non-techies, and only takes a few minutes to set up. To use this tool, instructors can download the Remind app and set up their accounts. Instructors can customize their accounts by adding a photo, selecting their preferred language, designating office hours, and other preferences such as how to receive notifications and the option to integrate other apps. Once the account has been created, instructors can create their classes in the app. Each class has a unique code that students will use to sign up. To sign up, students compose a new text message to the number 81010, type in the course code provided by the instructor into the message box, and send. The instructor can see the name of each student that signs up for the class.

The instructor can send messages to an entire class, a small group, or a single person. Personal contact information remains confidential, and phone numbers are not exchanged between the instructor and students. Once a message is sent, it cannot be edited or deleted, and a complete message history is always available to access and download.

The use of Remind throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to quickly pass along important information to students was effective. As a result, I have continued using it for every class I teach. Through student opinion of instruction surveys, I have found that students appreciate the convenience of getting reminders right to their phones about upcoming assignments, exams, and important announcements for class. This helps students to stay on top of their work, thus increasing student success.

Since adopting Remind at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have found several creative ways to enhance student engagement and student success by providing access to class materials, sending questions for consideration, allowing students to ask questions during set office hours, and reaching out to struggling students. For example, I often want students to access online resources or think about a societal issue before our next class meeting and be prepared to discuss the information in class. With Remind, I can share links and pose questions to students, allowing them to watch short video clips, read articles, or reflect on the question presented right from their phones. Before using Remind, I would email links to students to find that only a few of them checked their email. I would have to spend the first several minutes of the class covering the content because so many students did not check their email. One beneficial feature of Remind is the ability to see a summary of how many students received the message and how many students read the message. This helps overcome the "I didn't receive it" comment I sometimes get from students.

The use of Remind also gives students more access to communicate with me and allows me to reach out to students that may be

struggling. Because I teach rigorous classes such as Data Analysis each semester, it is common for students to have questions about the content and assignments. In Remind, I set office hours, and students can send me questions during that time. If students are working on an assignment and encounter an issue, they don't have to stop working on it to come to my office or wait up to 24 hours for an email response. I am able to respond to questions promptly from my phone. It also cuts down on the number of assignment-related emails that I receive. I also use Remind to reach out to struggling students in my courses and encourage them to ask questions to avoid falling behind in the course.

The pandemic created many challenges for instructors, and an unintended benefit was that it forced us to develop innovative strategies to educate and engage with students. The ability to implement these strategies into our courses since the pandemic has continued to enhance the learning experience for students.

Fostering Informal Group Solidarity and Social Support with the Chat Apps

Case Number Three: GroupMe

Literature on student success has overwhelmingly shown that social support from peers during college positively impacts a variety of student success metrics (Brannan et al., 2013). Further, lower levels of social support can contribute to a range of mental health issues (Hefner and Eisenberg, 2009). Intensifying this, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students were increasingly isolated, contributing to increases in the prevalence of mental health issues on college campuses (Fruehwirth et al., 2021). College is a transitional time for students as many of the norms and conceptualizations of their lifeworld shift. Compounding these conditions, recalling Durkheim's notion of anomie, the changes to educational delivery necessitated by the pandemic, such as more virtual learning, less contact with peers, and fewer informal gatherings may have intensified existing anxieties related to the transition to college.

A credo, if you will, that I used with my students during the pandemic was "physical distance, but social nearness"; essentially, that while we must maintain physical distance (six-feet), we must work even harder to remain socially connected and supportive of each other. I noticed early in the pandemic that informal support networks like study groups, student note/material sharing, and new friend groups, which had always organically developed in prior classes, were not emerging due in part to the physical distancing requirements and increased usage of virtual learning. To address this, I actively promoted these hitherto naturally developing social support networks using a free mobile group messaging app that many students are familiar with called GroupMe. This "chat app" allows users to create forums where invited users can send messages (with replies), post polls, and share events. I tasked one student with creating the GroupMe forum in each class with an incentive of a small amount of extra credit (typically a student I was familiar with from prior classes).[2] The student would download the app and create the group forum,

[2] In classes where there is a teaching assistant, this can be something they set up before the semester begins.

which generates a QR code. The student would then email me the QR code to post on the announcement section of the course management website for students to scan and gain access to the class forum (GroupMe, 2023).

Key to the effectiveness of promoting informal class networks on GroupMe is remaining uninvolved; I never add myself to the group. Thus, students could freely discuss information in class, ask questions, organize study sessions, request or distribute class notes, and even occasionally grumble about the difficulty of class assignments or the workload their professor assigns (collective frustration with a common adversary creates group solidarity too). In one of my courses, a student raised a question about a paper in the class GroupME forum, and many others replied that they had a similar question. In class, one student asked for the entire group, at which point I was able to clarify the admittedly convoluted paper prompt for the whole class at once. A second instance illustrating the effectiveness of GroupMe occurred when a student early in the semester noticed a due date for a major assignment coincided with a due date for a major project in another class (this was an upper-division class of mostly junior and senior majors, many of whom were taking another upper-division course in the major concurrently). This was discussed at length on the class GroupMe forum, and one student volunteered to approach me and describe the general sentiment of the class as worried/stressed about having two major assignments due on the same day. I moved my assignment due date a week later, preempting a needless burden for the class, which contributed to better assignment submissions, a more satisfied classroom, and a general feeling of increased support from peers and professors.

This app helped foster more unity and support in my classrooms during the pandemic, as indicated by formal feedback in my class evaluations and informal feedback from discussions with students. In the formal evaluation of one of my upper level courses, one student commented "the class group chat helped me stay on top of my work"; another stated "using the class GroupMe was helpful for understanding readings." Encouraging students to create a GroupMe forum allowed for a student-run, informal, virtual space where they could have their individual and collective voice heard. Despite wearing masks, interacting with classmates less frequently, and remaining physically separate, the students were able to communicate and act as a unified class, forging those bonds essential to academic success and personal fulfillment in college. As we have transitioned back to face-to-face classes, I still encourage all my classes to create a class GroupMe forum to create informal academic social support networks, encourage students to work together, and empower their collective sentiments. GroupMe is an effective tool that the pandemic necessitated, but can assist in creating more supportive classroom environments characterized by social solidarity.

Physically-Distanced Experiential Learning? Using Secondary Data, a Cross-Disciplinary Approach, and Government Partnerships

Case Number Four: Secondary Data and Partnerships

In October 2019, less than a year before the COVID-19 pandemic began, our university

provost charged a committee of faculty and staff with developing a university Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) for 2021-2026. The committee was actively designing the QEP and sharing the goals with faculty in 2020-2021. The new QEP focused on shaping the undergraduate educational experience through experiential learning. This meant that concurrently with the pandemic, faculty were also striving to incorporate new experiential learning practices into their teaching. In Sociology, experiential learning initiatives have typically included service-learning, internships, and other face-to-face interactional experiences in the community (see Mooney and Edwards 2001; Parilla and Hesser, 1998). Even when simply limiting experiential learning within the discipline to that which is classroom rather than community-based, these have still involved face-to-face interactional learning. For example, the greatest strength of teaching focus group qualitative methodology in graduate classrooms is the classroom-based active learning and discussion that occurs (Thomas and Quinlan, 2014). Similarly, innovative activities that help students learn research ethics, such as role-playing activities where students serve as an IRB board (Sweet, 1999) or a diverse group of interested parties and stakeholders (Teixeira-Poit et al., 2011), both involve face-to-face interaction.

In 2021, instructors were maintaining physical distance among students in a variety of ways. Simultaneously, I was working to restore students' sense of belonging, connections to faculty and other students, and pathways to employment. To support these goals, I was seeking ways to get students involved in a course-based experiential learning project. A Criminal Justice colleague and I noted the rise in pedestrian- and bicycle-involved fatalities nationwide, and in speaking to local transportation planners, we learned it was a particular concern within our county. In the past, we might have designed a project for students that involved on-site internships with city or regional planning departments or tasked students to interview community members in a community needs assessment. Now, we were looking for an experiential learning project to examine this topic that students could engage in with limited face-to-face interaction.

Partnering with a regional governmental agency, we developed a cross-disciplinary project using secondary data that increases students' methodological and statistical analysis skills, individual initiative and accountability, and creativity. The development of this project was a positive benefit of the change in instruction that occurred during the pandemic. In the experimental learning course activity, students in Social Research Methods examined a large Georgia Department of Transportation dataset covering the associated conditions of pedestrian- and bicycle-involved crashes and fatalities across a subset of 18 Georgia counties (the regional government's service region) over the past five years. In assignments, students identified key variables of study (such as the time of day the crash occurred, the severity of injuries, lighting, and road surface) and made coding suggestions for each variable that they identified. These were then passed on to the Criminal Justice class. The Criminal Justice students discussed the source of the data and how it was collected (Georgia Uniform Vehicle Accident Reports) and then put the key variables into statistical software to perform univariate and bivariate analysis. The final report was

passed to the regional government partners in the project, and several students from the two courses involved presented a talk on the topic (along with a governmental representative) as part of our College of Humanities and Social Sciences lecture series.

The unintended benefit of the pandemic was to force us to think creatively about how secondary data could be used in experiential learning partnerships involving community agencies and cross-disciplinary work. This same model could be used to explore a number of different societal topics.

Paperless Writing or: How I Learned to Stop Printing and Love Virtual Paper Submissions

Case Number Five: Microsoft Word

Universities have increasingly pushed for reductions in paper usage on campus as initiatives to promote environmental sustainability and reduce costs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a third motivation for paper reduction emerged: reducing physical contact through distancing measures. I regularly teach one writing-intensive class at my university which includes weekly written assignments on course readings and seven formal essays. In a writing-focused course, instructor feedback on written skills and analysis of course material is critical to student success. Prior to the pandemic, students would submit physical copies of papers where I could mark the original document with minor comments. I would then type a list of comments and several sentences of overall feedback in a Microsoft Word document, print, attach the document to the papers, and return it to each student during class. Formerly, I found that passing hard copies of papers ensured that they at least spent some time leafing through comments in the paper and reading the more detailed feedback.

However, with a quick class lesson on how to view/read comments and track changes in Microsoft Word, I transitioned to completely paperless written assignments in my classes.[3] Student assignments uploaded to the course management website can be downloaded and edited directly using track changes and comments on the "review tab" on Microsoft Word. To simplify shorthand comments throughout the paper, I use a series of acronyms, or "codes", allowing me to add comments on specific lines of the paper succinctly.[4] I use 14 specific codes such as MC, which stands for "more concepts", MA for "more analysis", and CITE, which indicates a missing or incorrect citation. I still use written comments when more specific feedback is necessary, but these codes allow me to quickly mark common issues. For major editing or writing issues, I comment with the code EW for "editing or

[3] While I prefer electronic paper submissions using Microsoft Word, I am aware that new technologies for written submissions exist including Google Docs, Turnitin, and a variety of institutional submission platforms across university course management sites. Any of these can be used, I prefer Word as I teach mostly upper-division and graduate-level courses and Word is still common practice in academic writing.

[4] I create a document listing the "codes" — acronyms which have a sentence or two explaining the meaning in a document on the course management site. I also organize these codes into three types: informational/analysis issues, writing/structural issues, and "other" issues such as lateness or insufficient word count. I post this along with the assignment instructions and grading rubric where students can refer to the "codes" when reviewing feedback.

"writing" issues and, using track changes, rewrite a few words, a sentence, or several lines to illustrate the issues; for all subsequent EW codes, the student can refer to the edited section as a model. The comments on Microsoft Word help students quickly spot problem areas and specific issues in the paper and allow the instructor to skim the paper for issues when typing up more specific feedback at the end of the paper.

My major hesitation with paperless assignments was assuaged when my hand was forced during the pandemic. I was concerned that students would not read feedback virtually; handing a paper to a student is an active exchange and uploading comments to a course management site is a passive exchange. However, the course management site at my university indicates whether the feedback has been read or not for each student's assignment. I can look through the assignments and identify students that have not viewed the feedback; an email reminding these students of the point deduction for not reading feedback before starting the next paper is quite effective, and this issue is typically resolved early in the semester.

Moreover, in two ways, paperless writing assignments (in Word or any format) are superior to hard copies. First and foremost is increased transparency for the instructor and student. There is never any discrepancy in whether a student submitted a paper, the instructor returned it, or the feedback was read. Second, handwritten comments can be difficult to read or dispiriting to students. Though I have long typed feedback and printed it to return with student papers, my notes, markings, and shorthand could occasionally be misread (as many academics can attest, penmanship is not indicative of intelligence) or discourage students. Before instituting all paperless written assignments, several students commented that the handwritten notes made them nervous to read the feedback and caused them to perceive their papers as deficient; many students may see marks on their papers as penalties or signs of mistakes rather than constructive criticism, helpful suggestions, and active reading with a pen on my part. To the instructors who adopted paperless assignments before the pandemic and who may consider me slow to the table, I offer my regrets; this transition has been invaluable to my writing-intensive courses.

Conclusions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty in higher education were forced to adapt long-standing educational methods. This paper described innovations related to five aspects of teaching that had been transformed for virtual learning but remain useful post-pandemic. Following the call of Williamson (2021) to adapt to the shifting educational landscape by incorporating various pedagogies and classroom modalities, this case study illustrates the utility of five specific technologies/innovations borne during the "challenging times," which have benefits moving forward. These five practices promoted professionalism, improved class engagement, increased communication and transparency, and enhanced student solidarity. Implementing these techniques has challenged traditional classroom hierarchies, reconstructing the learning environment to a more equitable model by giving more agency to students. While these strategies increase accountability for students, they also require more preparation and planning by the instructor leading to a more organized and cohesive educational delivery strategy. Though we find great value in these practices,

future research should investigate these pedagogical techniques more systematically to evaluate their effectiveness in increasing student engagement and improving educational delivery.

The COVID-19 crisis had massive societal implications, the effects of which will take decades to fully clarify. Throughout history, humanity has evaded social, economic, biological, and environmental catastrophes, and has again navigated a major microbial catastrophe. As in historical crises, there are insights to be gained. It is often said that necessity is the mother of invention, and as educators, we must not simply revert to familiar teaching practices used pre-pandemic, forgetting those practices which we found beneficial during difficult times. That is not to say that all, or even most pre-pandemic methods need major or any overhaul, but rather that the small innovations, the minor tweaks, and all the tiny sparks of creativity that educators across the globe uncovered out of necessity (these are but a few) allows us to push higher education forward— "onward and upward!"

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