

Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Faculty Engagement During the Transition to Online Learning

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Abstract: Undergraduate students have reported challenges with staying connected to course content, their peers, and to their instructors during the disruption and transition to virtual platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hollister et al., 2022) and there has been a lack of readiness to effectively engage with students and deliver instructional content reported by post-secondary faculty members (Martin et al., 2019) despite a need for relationship-centered teaching. To investigate these problems, the following study examined the perceptions of faculty engagement practices for undergraduate students who endured this transition. Using Seif's learning engagement theory and dimensions of deep learning (2018), seven undergraduate students from one small private institution of higher education in the North Eastern United States were interviewed to learn more about how faculty engaged them as students during the online transition. Outcomes included five themes of a) feelings of empathy, b) a perception of, and/or interest in flexibility, c) a recognition that being a part of a learning community was important to their success, d) varying degrees of internal and/or external motivation, and e) real-world applications. Recommendations for teaching practice as a result of research findings included a focus on relationships, providing rich feedback and clear expectations for students, and making your online teaching memorable for students while adjusting teaching practices to align with the delivery method. Recommendations for future research included investigating student engagement perspectives in online courses now that the pandemic response has dissipated, how students perceive the shift to online learning has benefitted their learning and engagement, as well as faculty perceptions of how they have engaged learners in online courses.

Keywords: Engagement, deep learning, online teaching, pandemic, disruption

Educational practitioners of students of all ages have an ethical and professional responsibility to their students' engagement. And the students in our respective classrooms, regardless of whether or not they are enrolled in an early childhood program or are adult undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral students, may hold perceptions of our adherence to this responsibility in opposition to what we intend. In the spirit of our collective ongoing commitment to improving educational practice, it is critical to actively seek out the student experience in order to better understand the efficacy of our intentions. This commitment is particularly relevant during unanticipated events that propel both ourselves and our students into emergency situations, such as the abrupt transition into an online learning context as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

All but very few schools around the world, their students, and their instructors faced an unanticipated crisis without either a viable strategic model to lead them or a clear indication of how or when the situation would be resolved. This crisis thrust many instructional facilitators and their students in a position to participate in a learning environment with which they were unprepared and often unfamiliar. The central research question of this study examined undergraduate students' perceptions of engagement strategies used by faculty during the transition to online learning during

the COVID-19 pandemic and how those strategies were perceived by students to affect their motivation.

Contextualizing the pandemic's disruption on the undergraduate experience is imperative to understanding the basis of this qualitative study. The reach of the pandemic, which the World Health Organization declared "a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)" on January 30th, 2020, was vast (World Health Organization, 2020, as cited in DeMartino & Weiser, 2021), ultimately forcing the transition of 98% of the world's schools to transition from a traditional to either an online or hybrid learning model (Keeling, 2020). The COVID-19 disruption, which contemporary educators had not experienced at this magnitude (Adams & Muthiah, 2020; Thien & Adams, 2021, as cited in Adams et al., 2021), resulted in the largest global shutdown of schools since World War II (d'Orville, 2020). Narrowing the focus to better understand the extent to which this transition impacted the undergraduate experience in the United States, specifically, there were 21 million students enrolled in institutions of higher education in 2021 (Duffin, 2022). Of these, at least 87%, or approximately eighteen and a half million undergraduate students, experienced enrollment disruption as a result of the shift to online learning (Hollister et al., 2022; NCES, 2022). Accordingly, there was a 93% increase in online enrollment of undergraduate students at National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) institutions in the Fall of 2020. This was an increase from 3 million in the Fall of 2019 to nearly 6 million in the Fall of 2020 (Lederman, 2021), which was the semester following the closing of campuses and the movement to online learning due to COVID-19 (Lederman, 2021). This upward trend in online enrollment enhances the significance of this study and our imperative to understand the online learning experiences of undergraduate students.

Given the high enrollment trends immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a possibility that educators working either partly or full-time in an online environment will be called upon to serve increasing numbers of students. The importance of leveraging pedagogical strategies aligned with the learning process in order to build rapport with an increasingly diverse field of students is critical in contemporary educational research (Sybing, 2019).

Literature Review

Online learning has experienced significant growth in global education because it provides opportunities for students in remote locations and with limited resources who may not be able to otherwise access post-secondary institutions (Delaney & Fox, 2013, Roll et al., 2013, as cited in Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Student engagement is an increasingly important area of scholarly interest, particularly due to the increase in online platforms available to students around the world (Bergdahl, 2022), however, how educators and researchers measure and understand engagement and disengagement is complex process due to a wide range of contextual variables (Grønberg, 2013, as cited in Bergdahl, 2022).

Relationships, specifically the building of rapport and a learning community, are necessary for student engagement in an online learning environment (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). It is through varying degrees of interaction that relationships may be built, which directly affect student learning and motivation (Gimpel, 2022). Existing scholarship affirms that student engagement in all learning contexts is critical to student success and satisfaction, especially in online learning formats (Martin & Bollinger, 2018 and Singh et al., 2019, as cited in Gimpel, 2022). Additionally, higher levels of engagement directly reduce issues related to feelings of isolation and increase retention rates towards degree completion (Banna et al., 2015, as cited in Martin & Bollinger, 2018; Bavli et al., 2021; Bergdahl, 2022).

The specific research problem driving this qualitative study was that undergraduates consistently reported difficulties in staying connected to course content, their peers, and to their

instructors during the transition to virtual and/or synchronous platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hollister et al., 2022). A sample of 1,008 undergraduate students who had shifted to online learning in the spring of 2020 affirms this existence of this problem (Means & Neisler, 2020, as cited in Hollister et al., 2022). For instance, approximately half of respondents reported being very satisfied with in-person learning experiences prior to the pandemic, and only 19% reported being very satisfied with their online learning experience after campus closures (Means & Neisler, 2020, as cited in Hollister et al., 2022). Additionally, of 3,089 undergraduate respondents in another study, 78% shared that their online classes “were not engaging, and 75% [stated] they missed face-to-face interactions with peers and instructors” (Read, 2020, as cited in Hollister et al., 2022, p.1-2). Another aspect of the problem is a lack of readiness to effectively engage with students and deliver instructional content reported by post-secondary faculty members (Martin et al., 2019). While many institutions of higher learning offered online programs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, not all faculty in all institutions were trained to effectively deliver content, which exacerbated the problem. For example, Lichoru (2016, as cited in Martin et al., 2019) discovered that many faculty members feel unprepared to teach in an online environment. And Downing and Dymont (2013, as cited in Martin et al., 2019) found faculty members’ perceptions of online teaching to be too time-consuming. Multiple additional studies investigating undergraduate student experiences in online learning in a variety of different cultures and geographic regions mirror the problem of student engagement during online and virtual learning (Nambiar, 2020, Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020, Xhelili et al., 2021, as cited in Jaradat & Ajlouni, 2021). Reasons for why student experiences can lack engagement can be due to many reasons, with lack of faculty empathy and course community (Fuller, 2008; Goyack, 2021) being common challenges.

Theoretical Framework

The deep learning framework is built upon the idea that 21st century learners must develop essential behaviors, including understanding, skills, and habits of mind, in order to be fully engaged in the learning process (Seif, 2018). There are four vital components of deep learning: instructors “must have a deep learning mindset,” “students are heavily engaged in the learning process,” the teaching of content must be carried out as a “high cognitive challenge,” and students should have opportunities to apply what they learn in a real-world context (Seif, 2018, p.1). Effectively, a deep learning model ensures that students have opportunities to work with complex ideas, take risks, participate in, and lead, inquiries relative to subject discipline content, and understand and apply their learning beyond the classroom (Seif, 2018).

When teachers, regardless of grade level or subject discipline, create opportunities for students to extend their learning, practice critical and creative thinking skills, and develop an understanding for how knowledge is constructed, they are promoting a deep learning mindset (Seif, 2018). When students become increasingly comfortable with asking complex questions and work more effectively in collaboration with peers, can offer and examine alternative solutions to real-world problems, and are exercising more complex thought processes, they are purposefully engaged in their own learning process. (Seif, 2018). Students are exercising high cognitive ability when their individual agency experiments with content analysis, personal interpretations, alternate solutions to discipline-specific problems, and developing thoughtful and well-reasoned, evidence-based arguments (Seif, 2018). Authentic applications of solutions to existing problems builds a deep learning skillset, promotes curiosity, strengthens critical thinking, and amplifies the value of the learning process beyond a school-specific context (Seif, 2018). Deep learning is neither content nor subject specific; it is possible at all levels and in any learning context (Seif, 2018). Understanding the exceptional and sudden shift in learning platforms brought about by COVID-19 and realizing the vital need for undergraduate students working in an online forum to continue access to a deep learning experience, the co-

researchers wanted to better understand the extent to which their professors were perceived to create these opportunities.

Materials and Methods

In order to give context to the response of the institution to the COVID 19 pandemic, the following timeline benchmarks indicate the response from the state government and subsequent institution of higher education (Local News, 2024). The disaster declaration of the pandemic initially was declared on March 6, 2020 and within the next two weeks, all schools and businesses were closed to reduce the spread of the virus (Local News, 2024). Within this initial shutdown timeframe, a National Shut Down was also declared by the President of the United States. All guidance that led to classes resuming in an online format resulted from this initial shutdown, disaster declarations, and guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2023) and the National Institute of Health (NIH, n.d.).

The site in which the study took place was a private institution of higher education in the North Eastern part of the United States. Prior to the pandemic response shutdown, approximately nine percent of all undergraduate courses were offered in an online format and approximately two-thirds of all undergraduate students enrolled at the institution would consider it unlikely to take an online course (Site Institutional Research, 2024). Because of these trends, moving into a fully online environment at the onset of the pandemic was especially challenging for faculty and students in environments such as these, with online teaching and learning being somewhat foreign to many.

To ensure that this research closely followed strict ethical protocols, the researchers submitted their proposal to their University Institutional Review Board which approved the study. Once initial contact was made with prospective participants and informed consent was secured from each eligible individual, we scheduled one on one interviews. Interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes each, were carried out via the Zoom platform, and dually audio recorded on the researchers' voice recorders and on Zoom. Zoom recordings were destroyed after transcripts were generated. Transcripts are only accessible to the researchers on their private, password-protected computers. Both authors developed the interview protocol to align with Seif's (2018) dimensions of deep learning theoretical framework. Seif (2018) scaffolds this conceptual model beginning with the teacher having a mindset focused on deep learning, an expectation that students are highly involved in their own learning, the delivery of content requires high cognitive engagement, and applications of learning in a real-world context are offered. This model gave us an appropriate structural lens through which we could stage our inquiry. It was our intention to discover how this study's undergraduate student participants perceived their instructors' ability to engage in a deep learning model during the unanticipated transition to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

After gaining approval from the institutional review board, we broadcast a call for prospective participants. Participant selection was guided by criterion sampling, which dictated eligibility based on two pre-determined criteria: participants must have experienced a transition from a traditional face-to-face classroom environment to online learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; participants must have been currently enrolled in an undergraduate program at this particular private institution of higher education in the United States. Additionally, in the pursuit of a campus-wide representation, we wanted our participant pool to reflect at least 5-7 individuals enrolled in distinctly different undergraduate programs. The rationale for this final criterion was to collect the experiences of students across multiple colleges represented within the university, rather than from within a single track. While this was our intention, it is also a limitation of the study, which we discuss in our findings. Table 1 is a demographic illustration of our selected participants, their declared major at the time of the study, and their assigned pseudonym to protect anonymity. No other demographic information was gathered

on the participants. We have redacted all other identifying information not pertinent to the study. In our discussion of findings, participants are referred to exclusively by pseudonym.

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms.

Name	Declared Major	Gender
Aubrey	Environmental Science	Female
Lee	Biology	Male
Sandy	Biochemistry	Female
Stan	Chemistry	Male
Shelly	Psychology	Female
Jill	Management	Female
Willa	English Education	Female

Interview questions (Table 2) align with Seif's (2018) three levels of student engagement within the deep learning theoretical framework and were designed as open-ended and semi-structured in order to establish context and allow each participant to take any approach appropriate to their perceived experience (Seidman, 2013). It was our intention to create a setting in which participants could autonomously reflect on their own "understandings [and] perspectives, and attribution of meaning" (Merriam, 2002, p. 166). By subjectively focusing on their experiences, we intended for participants to reflect on which aspects of their faculty's engagement during online learning affected their levels of motivation, if at all (Seidman, 2013). In the crafting of our interview protocol, care was also taken to avoid asking leading questions which would have the potential to influence the direction participants might take in their responses (Seidman, 2013). The use of open-ended questions does have inherent limitations due to their inability to provide causal explanations (Krosnick & Pressner, 2010), and the researchers acknowledge this. As such, the findings of this qualitative study are indicative of their personal experiences and not generalizable to a population of undergraduate students beyond our participants and their unique experiences.

Table 2. Interview Questions.

1.	How would you describe your general approach to learning in a traditional classroom setting?
2.	How did faculty interact with you in traditional course(s)?
3.	How would you describe your initial expectations about online learning?
4.	How, if at all, have those initial expectations been affected in any of the online courses you have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5.	How do/did faculty interact with you in online course(s)?
6.	In what way(s) have your motivation levels been influenced by faculty engagement in your online courses?
7.	How, if at all, have you been given opportunities to apply your learning in authentic, real-world situations in your online coursework?
8.	From your perspective, what strategies have faculty used to help create these opportunities for learning?
9.	What strategies have helped you maintain your levels of engagement in your online courses? Does this include interaction with your faculty and peers?
10.	Now that you have had some experience learning in an online setting, how interested would you be in enrolling in additional online courses in the future?

Validity and Reliability

To check reliability and ensure validity, each participant was given the opportunity to engage in a member-checking process. Member checking in a qualitative study is carried out by providing tentative findings to participants for their review (Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 2013). No discrepancies between our analysis and participants' intentions were noted. As another measure to preserve reliability and understanding as educational leaders ourselves who experienced COVID-19, teach in predominately online and hybrid learning environments, and that we share aspects of our participants' social world (Maxwell, 2013), we practiced reflexivity by openly discussing our assumptions and expectations of participant experiences prior to and during our interview process (Merriam, 2002). Though none of our participants have ever been either directly or indirectly our students, both researchers have a professional history as educational leaders in a variety of capacities, including the P-12 and higher education realms. Therefore, their individual and collective experience was a phenomenon we could understand and appreciate. In effect, their experience was separate, yet we did not want that separation to divide us from gleaned relevant insights and asking appropriate questions designed to explore the depth of their personal experience (Maxwell, 2013).

Findings

The researchers, who are also practitioners, acknowledge and understand that the instructors referenced by the participants in this study, were also subjected to the complexities, challenges, and uncertainties of COVID-19 in their personal and professional lives. It is reasonably expected that some, or all, of the instructors serving our participants had either no prior experience teaching in an online environment or were managing disruptions in their lives that would have likely affected their ability to teach at their highest capacity. This reality is a critical understanding in this study; at no point was there any attempt to evaluate instructional efficacy outside the scope of the COVID-19 context. This was made clear to each participant at the beginning of each interview session.

Of the seven participants of this study, only two had any pre-COVID-19 experience with online learning, and for both of those students, the exposure to a virtual learning platform had been only one class they had taken previously in their respective high schools. No participants had extensive experience with online learning as an undergraduate student.

The data from the interviews were analyzed and manually coded to determine themes. The experiences of the seven undergraduate students in this phenomenological study shared five common themes: a) feelings of empathy, b) a perception of, and/or interest in flexibility, c) a recognition that being a part of a learning community was important to their success, d) varying degrees of internal and/or external motivation, and e) real-world applications. In addition to the themes, which emerged from our data analysis and are specific to our inquiry, some participants also emphasized the difficulties they encountered in the first few days following the shift in learning platforms. This additional discovery is expanded upon in this section prior to the discussion of themes.

As universities were making plans to shift the entirety of their coursework to an online learning platform, each of the students in our study was actively engaged in trying to navigate their own uncertainties about COVID-19, including how, and in some cases, if, they were going to be able to continue their studies. The students were initially and continuously focused on how to connect with other peers, their professors, and the content of their courses in a meaningful, yet entirely unfamiliar manner while also trying to navigate a world in which personal health and safety were a top priority.

In all instances, the students of this study perceived that one of the most important qualities their most effective professors exhibited was empathy. In effect, it was the feeling of being understood and hearing from their instructors their shared experience as a means to convey a sense of common

humanity that was the difference maker for these particular undergraduates during the unknown that followed the immediate transition to online learning during COVID-19.

Finally, their common perception of, and experience with, professors who were accommodating, patient, and creative in how they established a unique, virtual learning community and integrated ways to think about and apply content outside of the context of that community enabled these students to feel like they were engaging in deep learning, despite the challenges of disruption.

Initial Feelings of Disruption

Some of the participants reflected on initial feelings of disruption during the early stages of the transition. While feeling unsettled or uncertain about how their role in an unanticipated virtual environment could be attributed to their lack of contextual experience, they all attributed their feelings of disruption to general concerns associated with the pandemic itself. For instance, Shelly, a psychology major, remembers thinking that shifting into an online learning platform might be easier and more efficient than sitting in traditional classrooms. However, while there were fewer distractions, Shelly reports that “It was definitely not easier.” From Shelly’s perception, the expectations of learning in an exclusively online environment dramatically contrasted with the realities of a virtual setting. Willa reflected on initially realizing that all of the relationships with peers and professors were dramatically altered as unreal. Prior to moving into an online format, she had been a highly motivated learner; however, she had to come to terms with learning synchronously, and while “it just didn’t feel like it was real, [it was] just something [she] had to do.” Willa had a particularly compelling statement in her reflection on the early days of online learning. She thought that life in general “just didn’t feel like it was real” and that it was just something that she had “to deal with because even if it feels wrong, even though it’s not technically wrong, it just [didn’t] feel normal.” Willa’s unsettled feeling did begin to wane as she grew increasingly comfortable in her new existence, even as notions of discomfort persisted in the weeks following the initial transition.

Lee also expressed a similar sentiment. His initial reaction underscores the uncertainty about what life and learning was going to look like during the COVID-19 disruption. Lee realized that he “just didn’t know [what to expect] because it was so crazy at the time . . . that all of this was happening.” And for Lee, the disruption to his life extended beyond the immediate context of his classes into his personal life in general. He used the idiom “threw a monkey wrench in my plans” to describe how the dramatic changes in life that affected the fun things he and his friends were planning to do in and out of school. Lee also spoke to the initial disruption of having to get used to being on camera, feeling the need to respect professors’ attempts to deliver content, and just not being able to have individual dialogues with instructors when desired. He expressed that these initial feelings were shared by his classmates:

We just didn't want anyone to look at us and we didn't want to encroach on the professor's time and what they were doing. But in doing that . . . all [we] saw was a sea of black screens with the professors. So engagement, even with your friends and the teacher at the same time that you get in traditional [classrooms] was gone. So that just made it all harder. You couldn't stop by anybody's office because nobody was on campus.

Stan, a chemistry major, noted that one of the early anxieties of the virtual platform experience was associated with the challenges of “getting spotlighted” by the professors that just felt uneasy at first. Sharing ideas in a traditional face-to-face environment is a risk students might resist because they may sometimes feel vulnerable among their peers. Stan felt that being able to engage in class

discussions and responding to questions increased feelings of anxiety before students began to grow increasingly comfortable with these changes. Stan referred to this resistance as a “fear in people.”

Sandy, a biochemistry major, openly talked about the initial challenges she faced in the early weeks of the transition. She stressed that it was “definitely difficult [because she] didn’t expect it to be so hard . . . checking in and asking questions [and] seeing a blank screen.” The adjustment was difficult for Sandy, she reasoned, because a perceived lack of engagement was “awkward and uncomfortable” and at times, there was just no “check back” from professors. Sandy was particularly open with her own mental health at the onset of the transition, which she described as a challenge because she felt that she had “no reason to get out of bed [and] there’s no sort of rhythm [which made her] mental health decline horribly and that [made] everything harder.” Sandy did reflect later in our discussion on the appreciation she had for her professors’ tendency towards being flexible and understanding, which helped ease her initial struggles adjusting to online learning.

The initial disruption of COVID-19 caused anxiety, uncertainty, economic difficulties, and other stress-related concerns amongst undergraduate students around the world (Cao et al., 2020; Jia et al., 2021; Santabábara et al., 2022, as cited in Stock et al., 2022). While the emotional and social distress of the pandemic was not the primary focus of our inquiry, some participants independently acknowledged the difficulties of the transition that contributed to general engagement challenges. However, as participants began to settle into their new modes of learning and became increasingly comfortable in that context, they all spoke to the strategies their professors deployed to support degrees of deep learning.

In light of the difficulties these undergraduate students experienced with the initial disruption to their daily lives and their learning environment, one of the most common perceptions they shared was the understanding that their faculty were also undergoing a dramatic change. Some participants spoke to how their instructors verbally acknowledged the challenges being shared, openly discussed how those challenges were affecting their personal lives, and reassured their students that they were all in it together. These expressions of understanding evoked feelings of empathy amongst some of our participants, which aided their comfort with the transition and supported their ability to engage purposefully with course content.

It was quite rare for students to describe perceptions of professors who did not prioritize an empathetic approach at the center of their online teaching. These expressions of empathy were demonstrated in a variety of ways. Lee, who majored in biology, acknowledged that all but one teacher was verbally “appreciative of the fact that [the new learning mode was] new [and this was] hard for everybody.” Aubrey, who majors in environmental science, reflected on how her professors interacted with individual students during the transition and offered that most of her instructors approached teaching with a “I’m in the same boat as you” mind frame. While there were instances in which an instructor was perceived to lack empathy and flexibility with due dates and pandemic-related family conflicts, especially, Aubrey felt, if the professors themselves were experiencing crises, most were understanding of individual challenges, especially in the early days of the transition. She mused on her perception of professors’ attitudes of empathy and simply offered that it felt like they also understood that “This pandemic sucks, but I know it sucks for [the students] too.”

Stan spoke to the importance of care and the perception that his professors were actively trying to encourage and model student engagement by promoting a deep learning process, rather than simply asking to have information restated in assessments. In the demonstration of care, accessibility was critical for Stan. He spoke of one professor who went out of his way, even in a virtual environment, to be available and responsive. Stan reported that this professor’s empathetic approach was characterized by taking the time to re-teach concepts and would repeatedly state his availability outside of class time to ensure that students could reach out with follow up questions or to request clarification of content. He was, in Stan’s words, trying to “give [us] more than [basic] learning . . . and

cramming.” Care was at the center of other participants’ experiences as well, and like Stan, each of them spoke to the importance of feeling understood as a means to connect with their instructors and the learning process.

Shelly’s perceiving being understood. She highlighted the practices of her professors who offered accommodations, verbalized appreciation for learners, and being made to feel like an individual, rather than a group. For instance, Shelly spoke of a professor who explicitly told students how eager they were to “go back in person [because I] miss you all” and who made deliberate attempts to “keep [learning] as normal as possible” and really went out of the way to “talk to us.” Shelly noted how much she appreciated feeling like her professors “were struggling with [the transition] just as much as we were and [were] trying to keep [sessions] interesting and engaging.” Another strategy Shelly expanded upon that made her feel like her instructors were actively empathizing was the use of humor to lighten class climate. The allowance for “joking around” Shelly experienced in some virtual sessions created an atmosphere in which she and her peers felt reduced anxiety and promoted a desire to really put her best effort in learning content. Additionally, having professors reach out directly either during a class or via email to simply check in with a basic “are you doing ok?” helped Shelly to feel a sense of belonging and diminished a sense of loneliness. Of her most empathetic and deeply engaging instructors, Shelly reported that “they definitely tried to be aware of how [we] were feeling and connect[ed] with [us to] be understanding.”

Flexibility

Given the particularly unanticipated disruption of the COVID-19-influenced transition to virtual/hybrid learning models, undergraduate students have reported heightened feelings of vulnerability and psychological stress (“Education in a Pandemic,” 2021). Post-secondary and P-12 students benefit from a synthesis of structure and flexibility, especially in times of crisis, in order to ensure their learning needs are being met while having opportunities to connect meaningfully with content (Anderton et al., 2021). Participants’ reflections on the steps their professors took to support learning often identified qualities indicative of flexibility. Shelly shared a noticeable increase in degrees of understanding amongst her professors. She illuminated various strategies that were adopted that were, she felt, designed to promote the learning process. Examples included altering coursework to fit the unique needs of individual students and issues related to accessibility, recording lessons and sharing them for later, more convenient viewing and revisiting, adding notes to presentations, and so on. All of these efforts were unique to the changes in learning modalities brought about by the pandemic. Additionally, when prompted, Shelly offered that in spite of these student-centered changes, professors were also perceived to be doing what they could to “keep the integrity of their class so that it’s not making it any harder or easier,” but just to achieve as much normalcy as possible while being committed to the learning process. Shelly did suggest that “everyone appreciate[ed] it.”

Lee spoke to his professors’ general heightened practice of being flexible as a strategy to promote accessibility. He deeply appreciated a willingness to initiate impromptu Zoom meetings, sometimes as quickly as within half an hour of reaching out to his instructors with questions outside of class. The professor and he “would share screens and be very involved in helping [him] figure [content] out, [which] helped [him] feel safer to ask questions and ask for help.” Lee’s affirmation of the value of his professors’ flexibility came through in his recognition of personal accomplishment. His experience with success was directly attributed to the teacher’s help and the ability to use what he was learning and applying it in new contexts. These impromptu sessions “helped motivate” Lee as a student during the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

Other examples of flexibility in the delivery of content included prioritizing more dialogue during online sessions. In particular, Aubrey perceived that one professor in particular experimented

with emphasizing student voice and reflection by having students free-write about a lesson, which she described as “word vomit [in which] you just write about [content], which makes [me] embed it in [my] brain.” Aubrey saw this practice as unique in her new learning environment and served as an important process of intentional reflection that supported her connection to previous and current course content.

Additionally, Sandy directly attributed her ability to ease into the new learning environment due to her professors’ flexibility. She stated that “they were pretty understanding and definitely a lot more lenient about things like due dates and attendance.” Her reflection on how teachers would check in with her just to ask if she was taking care of herself and acknowledging that this was more important than grades at the time was conveyed with thoughtful appreciation. She acknowledged that “it’s hard for people to [reach out to others and], no one was expecting everyone to check up on each other all the time, but [she] did experience a lot more of [this behavior than she] would’ve in a [traditional] environment.”

There were instances in which participants perceived professors’ initial attempts to mirror face to face lessons in an online environment. Examples included depending on standard lectures, holding the same number of classes for the same amount of time, and either not encouraging dialogue or promoting reflective practices. However, these were generally earlier in the transition and were not the norm for the participants of this study. In each reference to a perceived lack of flexibility, participants voiced frustration and a feeling that the teaching and learning process was less effective than in a traditional environment. An example of what this looked and felt like was shared by Jill, who alluded to only one class in which a professor “didn’t upload any lectures at all [and] we just had some PowerPoint with the summary and it seemed very difficult to [her].” In order to resolve those feelings of frustration with a lack of flexibility, Jill acknowledged that she sought “private lessons in order to pass the class.” While this anecdote demonstrates the participant’s personal responsibility and diligence, the data’s emphasis clearly suggests that a general commitment to accommodating students’ needs in a unique environment and being flexible with deadlines, course content, and experiment with various pedagogies was deeply appreciated and supported student learning in this context.

The Learning Community

Among the top five trends in the literature relevant to online learning modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic is the interaction among students, instructors, and content (Mark et al., 2022 as cited in Xuelan & Zhiqiang, 2023). If learners are to be at the center of any learning environment (Xuelan & Zhiqiang, 2023), better understanding how they interact with one another, course content, and how instructors facilitate group dynamics is an important element of the deep learning experience. One participant, Willa, summarized the concerns with building community in an online environment when asked why it can be so difficult to connect with instructors and peers in this setting. She acknowledged that making friends in a traditional setting is easier because of the natural tendency to interact with one another; however, she also noted that “it’s hard to make friends through Zoom if you’re only on Zoom during that class period [and] the teacher is talking.” Willa’s point, while the exception in our participants’ narratives, captures the potential effects of not prioritizing relationships and can result in feeling disconnected from the learning experience for those who matter most.

The undergraduate students in this study noted their professors’ intentionality in building community through collaborative practices, open discussions designed to promote student interaction with content and with each other, and prioritizing inclusive dialogic opportunities. Aubrey shared an appreciation for her professors’ attempts to build more collaborative practices into the online sessions. In her reflection on how these attempts to collaborate were helpful to building rapport and community, she spoke to the value of being “more open with each other and more communicative

because [we did not] know what was going to happen [and] we should be friendlier with each other and talk more.” In particular, there were a few classes where “professors really made an effort to keep engagement up . . . through discussion.” She recalls “lov[ing]” these moments, which caused her to “fall in love” with the subject in general. Aubrey also fondly recalled one instructor’s attempts to have fun with the class in a synchronous session in which the students were all tasked to stand up and “stretch or do something like clap if you hear [her],” which made Aubrey perceive an increased sense of togetherness.

Similar sentiments of the value of being together and building community were shared by other participants. Sandy also highlighted her perceptions of what she referred to as “fireside chats,” which one professor would schedule every two weeks or so. The objectives of these sessions were to share personal struggles and just connect with each other. For Sandy, these informal meetings helped to build morale and share a sense of humanity amongst her peers and instructor.

Another method instructors used to promote inclusivity in a virtual environment was to exercise patience so that everyone in the class had opportunities to share opinions. When individual ideas were treated equally, participants felt that all learners were welcomed to the same degree. Stan spoke specifically to a strategy of encouraging the asking of questions, which would create a sort of chain reaction as individual students would see that doing so was low-risk, high yield. This didn’t happen naturally at first when “nobody would speak,” however, once this strategy was trusted by students “others would also start speaking” and being increasingly open to new ideas and the voices of their peers.

One student asserted that her levels of motivation were directly linked to the strategies professors took to enlist student engagement and thought these strategies were important not only to herself but to others in the way they invited participation. Jill recognized that some of her teachers were deliberately trying to encourage and motivate group dynamics by creating an expectation for cameras to be turned on throughout a synchronous session, using digital whiteboards and other technologies to enlist student interest, and being available after class for smaller study sessions for those students who needed it. Jill felt that these approaches were helpful to continuing relationships in courses that had started in a face to face setting but had transitioned to a virtual one.

Degrees of Motivation

There is research on the importance of self-regulation among undergraduates and their success in a traditional learning environment. For example, students who thrive in challenging situations tend to be deliberate at setting goals, demonstrate high levels of self-awareness, are motivated by internal, as well as external, forces, and gain enjoyment out of the process of learning, not only the product or outcome (Deci & Ryan, 2002, Li et al., 2013, Zimmerman, 1990, as cited in Luo et al., 2021). We were interested in our participants’ experiences with and perceptions of self-motivation throughout the stages of learning online during the pandemic because deep learning is a consequence of the degree to which the learner has the capacity to fully engage in the experience of learning (Seif, 2018). The data were mixed with participants reporting wide ranges of motivation throughout their time engaged in a virtual learning platform.

One student, Aubrey, reported that professors who gave her opportunities “to do [her] own learning,” she experienced “higher motivation” and when professors maintained high expectations of student achievement, the result was positive. She felt that being expected to “do a discussion posted, [attend sessions and be] ready for a discussion made [her] more prepared.” Even when professors increased the number of online discussions students were expected to read and contribute to, Aubrey felt that “this is fun [which makes her] more motivated.” She also reported that her most successful

experiences with virtual learning were in courses with professors who “were very active returning [assignments]” with feedback. Aubrey’s level of motivation was a direct response to the commentaries she received on assignments, and felt that the time professors spent to provide immediate, constructive feedback supported her towards her goals. High expectations, along with infused comments and feedback seemed to equate to higher self-regulation and motivation levels.

Sandy spoke to the pressure professors would place on her and her classmates as an important factor in her level of motivation. She referred to this pressure as “force,” though she also acknowledged that it was carried out in the most “organic way possible,” and while she likes presentations and other responsibilities anyway, this approach helped her to “accomplish little things along the way,” which “makes [tasks] easier.” These strategies undertaken by her professors to obligate students to perform helped increase responsiveness and both individual and group engagement.

Lee’s experience with motivation was mixed. While he did reflect on positive levels of motivation experienced when a professor would ensure availability outside of synchronous sessions to re-teach a concept or answer follow up questions, he generally expressed diminishing motivation corresponding to reduced interaction with professors. One strategy he applauded was exhibited by the aforementioned professor who would provide extensive and clear feedback on assignments, much like Aubrey reported. Lee identified this approach as a “sigh of relief” which “was motivating,” though there was only one professor “out of all [his] other ones who would” practice this strategy. Stan also acknowledged that maintaining motivation levels were “more challenging during that first semester” and recognized that there were “a lot of factors” to consider as to what kept his motivation going. A self-proclaimed high-achiever, Stan referred to one professor who Stan felt like “pushed [him] to go even harder,” which he could do because he realized this professor was a “driving force.”

Shelly experienced an early setback with her motivation levels, despite being personally excited about the new semester prior to transitioning off-campus. She admitted that her motivation levels initially “died as bluntly as possible.” She “missed everything,” including her friends, other people, the classroom environment, and fears of either becoming ill and, given that she lived with a large family, getting others close to her was a significant challenge. Upon reflection, Shelly noted that simple techniques a professor would utilize, such as being highly responsive to every student on discussion boards, allowing opportunities to chat about life outside of the pandemic and the course content, and just trying to be relatable were appreciated and helped her to feel increases in motivation. At the time of this study, Shelly had moved back into some in-person classes and acknowledged that in doing so “her motivation levels [have] gotten better, and it makes [her] want to do [her] work and actually participate in things.”

Consistency was essential for Willa to sustain her motivation in the online environment. In addition to her teacher typically organizing due dates in the virtual forum from week to week, utilizing some of the features on the virtual platform helped motivate Willa to plan ahead. Jill shared similar examples of digital resources her professors would use to help students organize their coursework as ways that she was able to maintain higher levels of motivation. Jill also stressed her reliance on internal motivation to be successful in a challenging situation. Her academic record, specifically her grade point average, was a driving force, as was the goal to secure a “good job” and to be seen by a “future employer as a good student.” Though a self-proclaimed high-achiever, Jill felt like being motivated in most classes, virtual or face to face, was relatively easy because she like questions, being involved in discussions, and participating.

Real-World Applications

Seif’s (2018) deep learning model recognizes the necessity of moving beyond a basic instruction approach in order for students to be able to extend their understanding of concepts, reflect on content

knowledge, and apply what they are learning in unique situations beyond the classroom. In our inquiry to better understand undergraduate student perceptions of instructor engagement through a deep learning lens, it was essential to explore how, if at all, the participants of this study were given opportunities to deepen their understanding of course content, communicate their thinking in novel ways, and creatively and critically apply lessons in a real-world context. While participants' experiences with the most meaningful level of deep learning was minimal, which we attribute to the unanticipated and uncertain nature of the transition, there were some references to extended applications of knowledge by a few participants. The limited ability to speak to learning in unique situations beyond the virtual learning environment is explored in our discussion section.

What we did glean from participants was that in general the context of virtual leaning during the pandemic response was not conducive to the deepest levels of learning and application. For instance, Lee reflected on his experience as primarily just trying to cover basic content. Professors would occasionally entertain questions, such as “What are the implications of the real world?” and “How might this apply to what people actually do?” and these questions would help facilitate thinking “more than any homework assignment,” however, carrying these ideas to fruition was limited. It did seem that Lee wished he had more opportunities for critical thought and real-world action in his virtual coursework, though this is only the researchers' perception.

Similar to Lee's experience, Shelly was unequivocal in her response that authentic, real-world application was not feasible. She acknowledged that, as a science major, the “lab component is where you would apply what you're learning,” though she didn't “have labs while [learning] online.” Rather, “the professor [would] record things [and] you get the data and they talk about . . . how [they would conduct] the experiment if [they] were with [the professor].” Shelly cited a frustration with not getting “that experience to be able to do things [herself].” Shelly did offer that aspects of her psychology class had informal applications beyond the scope of the standard coursework. For instance, she noted that the emphasis on self-analysis in the course influenced her relationships with her family at home. Shelly also encouraged some members of her family to take a personality assessment, which they would discuss over dinner. She reflected that “was a fun way to stay engaged, [and] it was definitely easier to do” this in one class than the others.

Willa, who reflected on her work in one class in particular, referenced her online writing course as beneficial to her personal creative writing interests. She enjoys writing short stories and poetry, and the descriptive writing lessons helped her “improve on how [she] writes in different styles.” For Willa, the experience of transferring the skills she learned in class, especially through the “peer review process,” to her own passions as a developing writer was highly valued. That she was able to think about writing in new ways, experiment with different styles, reflect on her own skill set, and apply new techniques aligns with Seif's (2018) tenets of deep learning.

The final participant to acknowledge an application of content in a real-world context, Aubrey, had the most direct experience with deep learning. Aubrey stressed the relevance of her coursework to her life in general. In doing so, she saw the world around her in relationship to the subjects of her study in environmental science and biology. For instance, being able to think more critically about weather patterns and animal anatomy as a result of the lessons she learned in class were examples Aubrey noted of extended applications. She also noted that “almost all of [her] classes involved some kind of project-based component,” which she appreciated because they gave her opportunities to think more critically about content. Aubrey's experience of reaching levels of deep engagement, as described by Seif (2018), were a combination of her individual ability to see relevance in what she was learning in her personal world and deliberate attempts by professors to integrate projects into their online sessions.

Discussion

The transition to online teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic was abrupt and unexpected. Institutions of higher education, despite many offering online courses at their institutions, found themselves largely ill-equipped to manage this sudden transition from face-to-face instruction to online education with ease (Marinoni et al., 2020). While some faculty were able to gradually transition their practices and expertise from in-person instruction to online instruction, the unexpected nature of this demand was challenging and could have been exacerbated by the overall feelings of panic that the general public was experiencing (Marinoni et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, faculty and students embarked on the journey into online instruction in order to persist in the acts of teaching and learning during the 2020-2021 academic year. This study sought to better understand the student perceptions of ways faculty engaged students in their teaching practices and seek out ways that the academy could learn from these perceptions. The themes generated from the participant interviews were: a) feelings of empathy, b) a perception of, and/or interest in flexibility, c) a recognition that being a part of a learning community was important to their success, d) varying degrees of internal and/or external motivation, and e) real-world applications.

Teaching Recommendations

Participants in this study made recommendations for faculty teaching in their interview responses. The following recommendations are supported by research in various aspects of pedagogy.

Focus on Relationships

Demonstrations of empathy can show students that they are understood, their circumstances are noted, and that they are an integral part of a learning community, especially when circumstances are less-than ideal with connectivity, infrastructure, and technology challenges. Participants appreciated when faculty demonstrated empathy with learners: “Empathy is a cognitive skill that includes the ability to understand a person’s experience and communicate in a manner that conveys a recognition of individual concerns and perspectives” (Bradley et al., 2019, p. 252). This focus on empathy for individual students and the challenges they are facing is necessary, with the responsibility on faculty to appreciate and consider these challenging circumstances with students (Cartee, 2021).

Demonstrate that care is at the center of all you do. If timeliness and other behavioral goals are to be included in grading, could they be separated from academic outcomes so the student expectations are clearer on how they can use feedback to improve? Another way to demonstrate care is to check in with students via email, especially if seem disengaged during virtual sessions or miss class, to increase their feelings of being recognized and valued as individuals, rather than as a group.

Also, flexibility with pedagogical delivery and allowing for new teaching practices to be infused into courses was appreciated by students. Participants spoke directly about their frustration with the inability to contribute to discussions as being a barrier to learning. Transforming time spent in class to include more student voice is one way students can become more engaged in the learning process. Is there a way that lecture could be replaced with more dialogue? Could a dialogue become a debate? Could students become responsible for sharing portions of content with their peers instead of faculty being the only deliverers of ideas? Including reflection opportunities in each session enhances the potential for content to be retained and applied. Peer review processes often helps students continue development of a project or writing assignment over time. Implementing these strategies in our teaching practices promotes deep student engagement with content.

In addition to empathy and flexibility, participants seemed to seek out ways for faculty to build and foster relationships as if to be seen and heard as individuals worthy of knowing. Faculty members could hold online office hours or informal sessions to answer questions, provide feedback, and establish sustainable rapport. Building relationships and genuinely helping to generate common understanding can solidify trust with students and demonstrate care for their learning and growth.

Feedback and Expectations

Have high expectations of students, but also provide guidance, prompt and relevant feedback, and ensure clear outcomes are articulated to students. Participants in the study mentioned faculty feedback as one of the best ways to scaffold learning. Practices such as including course and weekly unit objectives, assignment expectations with rubrics for transparent assessment, and individualized feedback on student work can foster learning and growth.

In tandem with high expectations and prompt feedback, acknowledging when content may become more challenging within a course can demonstrate care for students and assist their navigation of increasingly complex material. Ensuring availability as content becomes more challenging and offering practice or study sessions will help scaffold learning. These meetings could be preplanned to coincide with the flow of coursework, and they also could be unplanned as needed.

Online Learning

Make online learning memorable. Some examples could include online office hours, infusing current events into weekly course announcements, a link to a professional webpage, and a photo collage as part of a “Meet the Instructor” page. Demonstrating our own individuality can help convey the degree to which we value students as individuals too.

Keep course integrity consistent, but not necessarily the delivery method. Lectures can have benefits if recorded and included in course content for extended and repeated viewing, but if the length or other factors, such as sound and video quality are lacking, students will be less likely to engage or reengage with these tools. Also, synchronous sessions can be useful in engaging with students and allowing them to engage with each other, not just lecturing on topics. Balancing theory and practice by infusing dialogue, utilizing breakout rooms for discussion, allowing participants to contribute to a shared Google Doc, or other innovations can help students to see additional value in online synchronous sessions and incorporate their ideas and purposeful engagement into the time spent together (Coman et al., 2020).

It is often not the case that online equates to easier (Coman et al., 2020), and participants agreed that online learning was at least equally as challenging as a traditional face-to-face setting. Intentionality to online course development can help temper the amount of reading, studying, preparing, attending, and assessing that takes place in online environments, allowing for the rigor and content to remain similar and not overcompensate for accessibility to the online environment.

Recommendations for Future Research

While the results of this study were valuable in informing the field regarding student perspectives on learner engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic response, there are other areas that could be researched as a result of these findings. One such recommendation is to investigate student engagement perspectives in online courses outside of the COVID-19 pandemic response. Since online teaching and learning has been expanding now that more faculty have had the opportunity to experiment with this format, hearing from students on what practices faculty have been using in the

post-COVID-19 era may inform our understanding of how faculty can engage learners over time. Also, seeking to understand student perspectives on how the COVID-19 pandemic response actually influenced their current learning experiences could better inform teaching practices. Now that student perspectives have been articulated, faculty perceptions of how they have engaged learners in online courses could be important voices in the scholarship.

Conclusion

Educators work hard to ensure that learners are given the very best experiences when it comes to teaching and learning. As such, there is an ongoing commitment to improving our practice by seeking out the experiences that our students have as we teach them. The disruption that occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic thrust teachers and learners into the online learning space, and this disruption forced a vastly different experience with educating and learning. Because of this disruption to online teaching and learning, this research study was conducted out of a curiosity of the experiences that students had in that transition with faculty and how motivation and engagement were influenced. Outcomes of this qualitative investigation included themes of a) feelings of empathy, b) a perception of, and/or interest in flexibility, c) a recognition that being a part of a learning community was important to their success, d) varying degrees of internal and/or external motivation, and e) real-world applications. Additionally, recommended practices students discussed were to focus on relationships, effective communication of feedback and expectations, and practical tips for online teaching success. While the transition to online teaching and learning was abrupt due to the pandemic, students articulated that faculty have the power to make a substantial difference in the experiences of undergraduate students. The lessons learned from these participants can inform our approach to effectively teaching and motivating our students in all circumstances and contexts.

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