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Teaching Lessons From COVID-19: One Department's Story of Transformation - An HBCU Narrative

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ABSTRACT

When the coronavirus pandemic hit the nation, colleges and universities in Maryland canceled face-to-face classes and switched to teaching their courses online in mid-March. The following exploratory study examines how the Department of Strategic Communication at Morgan State University (MSU), the largest historically Black university in the state, adapted aspects of its existing departmental culture in order to pivot to an emergency remote teaching environment during the coronavirus crisis. Through the lived-experience narratives of students, faculty, and staff, this study adds to the conversation about the value of compassionate teaching, community-building, co-creative learning, and course structuration. The article offers reflexive strategies and lessons for developing digital approaches to learning for the present and for crisis situations as a sustainable model.

Keywords: e-learning, emergency remote teaching, pandemic, co-creative learning, compassionate teaching, reflexive strategies

Building a Sense of Community through Communication

A supportive community and nurturing environment are foundational to historically Black colleges and universities' contributions to Black student holistic success (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Flemings; 1984). McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9). Thus, a sense of community has four major tenets of actualization - membership, influence, integration/fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. When the coronavirus pandemic hit the nation, colleges and universities in Maryland canceled face-to-face classes and switched to teaching their courses online in mid-March. Educators around the globe were faced with the challenge of maintaining a sense of community during this emergency remote teaching period through various technologies and digital platforms. The following piece is one academic department's response to such a challenge. =Morgan State University (MSU) in Baltimore is the largest historically Black university (HBCU) in the state with approximately 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. It was founded in 1867, after the Civil War, when America was a segregated society and entrance to most of the nation's universities was denied to African Americans. Approximately 80 percent of MSU's current enrollment is African American, but pre-pandemic MSU had a growing number of international and Latino students. MSU is located in a residential area of East Baltimore on a campus of 152 acres. Like other HBCUs, the university has a reputation for providing a nurturing environment for students, many of whom come from urban communities and are in the first generation of their family to attend college. A Carnegie-classified doctoral research institution, MSU offers more than 125 academic programs leading to degrees from the baccalaureate to the doctorate and acknowledges a diverse faculty. MSU comprises 10 academic units, and the School of Global Journalism & Communication (SGJC) is the youngest of Morgan State University's 10 academic units. It was formally established in July 2013 and began operations in the fall semester of that year. In the spring semester of 2020, there were 414 students in three undergraduate programs. In April 2020, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) granted SGJC initial accreditation having achieved all nine accreditation standards successfully.

The Department of Strategic Communication, affectionately known as "SCOM," is one of three academic units of SGJC, the other two departments being Multiplatform Production and Multimedia Journalism. SCOM provides eight courses each semester, such as strategic communication writing, strategic communication campaigns, event planning, social media, practicum, crisis communication, political communication, and strategic communication for leadership. The

department prepares students for careers in public relations, social media, media relations, entertainment communication, and digital-related jobs. SCOM has one full professor and one associate professor, both tenured. There are three tenure-track professors. Four of the five faculty members hold a Ph.D. in the field. The fifth faculty member expects to complete the doctorate by December 2020. Two of the five faculty members have earned the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). The department has one administrative assistant who contributed to this study. There were 108 registered students during the spring semester of 2020.

SCOM has accepted its characterization as nimble, a word that others have used to describe its response to the pandemic teaching period from March 10 to May 6, 2020. However, predisposed flexibility might be a better term. The size of the department, the previously established academic routines, the push to evolve into a "kinder" department, and the reorganization to high-touch active learning approaches were the pieces that formed the framework of practices during the pandemic. The department's nimbleness, however, did not begin with the pandemic but with the new SCOM department Chair appointed in 2018. At that time, a departmental-wide survey was conducted in order to get feedback from students about their ideas about the future direction of the department. While most students expressed overall satisfaction with the quality of instruction, there were some recommended areas of improvement. Seventy-eight percent of students voiced that the department could do more to be more welcoming. They reported that grading and other classroom practices were too inflexible.

Immediately, departmental faculty began meeting to find ways to be more flexible in classroom policies and departmental practices. Among the reforms were reducing the number of high stakes assignments, allowing students to submit major projects in stages giving ample opportunity for feedback and revision before final submission, and using rubrics in all classes with clear links to desired learning outcomes. The department has been working on refining its processes since then. As part of being more welcoming, the department's administrative assistant started doing frequent welfare checks on students to gauge feedback on the departmental reforms. Over time, the administrative assistant emerged as the department's chief retention officer. She routinely called students who were reported absent from class to see about their welfare. She ensures that all students have made appointments to be advised each semester. She tends to be the first triage stop for majors who may encounter challenges during the semester.

The survey also revealed that students wanted more emphasis on social and digital instruction. Eighty-two percent of students noted that the department's teaching approaches were too traditional and did not fully embrace social/digital media. Students also wanted more opportunities in entertainment and technical hands-on skills. Based on these results, the

faculty conducted a curriculum review to find ways to include social and digital skills in all SCOM classes. The curriculum review also resulted in a favorable recommendation to the SGJC Dean to hire a professor with specific skills in social media, digital communication, and analytics. This is key. From that point, the department's curriculum emphasis was being developed to have students work in social media and digital spaces. Therefore, it was no surprise that students were predisposed to completing work in online platforms and producing digital products during the pandemic learning experience. The department already had an emphasis on retention, active learning, online collaboration, and "compassionate academics." Thus, the pandemic presented the department with an opportunity to apply these practices to an emergency learning situation.

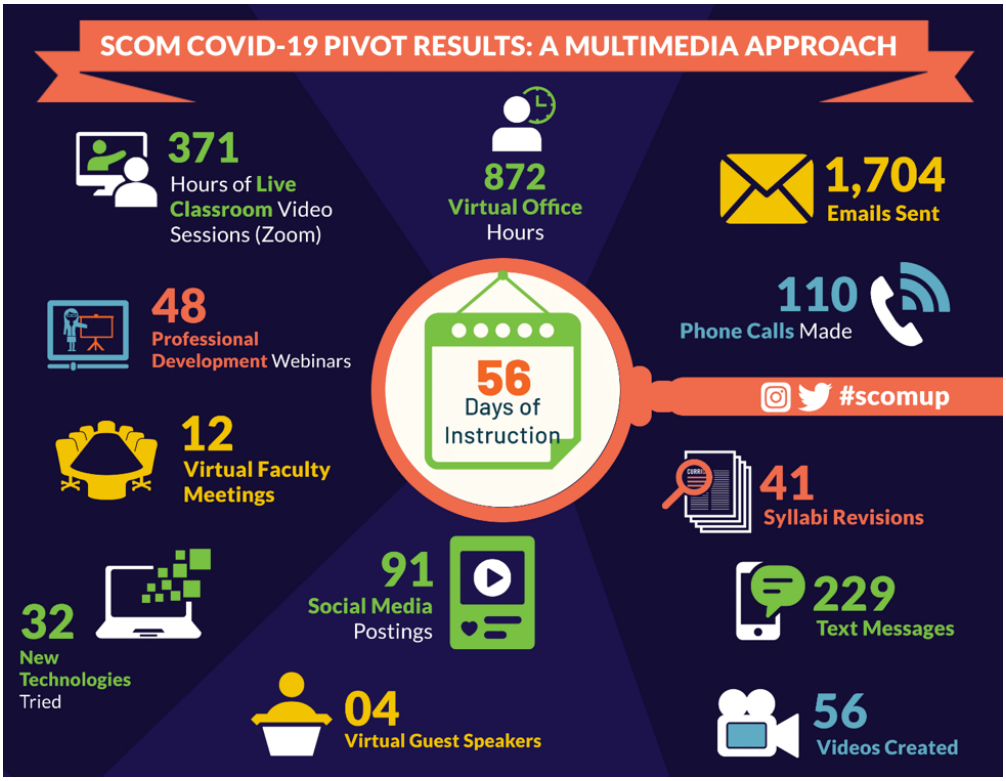

Figure 1 SCOM COVID-19 Pivot Results

Figure 1 provides a quantitative representation of our engagement with SCOM students as well as *visuall*y underscores the lengths we were willing to go as a coordinated department to make sure our students succeeded in an incredibly crucial moment in their academic careers.

The department's impact during the 56-day pandemic teaching period becomes more apparent when examining the outcomes of SCOM's implemented strategies for student success. Figure 1 shows specific multimedia activities faculty employed and the totals of those action items. It is important to note these approaches were not haphazardly developed but were designed in the first SCOM faculty departmental planning meeting in

March 2020 when the university decided to switch from face-to-face to remote instruction.

As we worked in the many ways that are illustrated, important questions emerged in our first daily and then weekly faculty meetings that ultimately guided the framing of this study. Questions such as: How were we going to codify the process that we were experiencing as it related to student achievements? What modalities appeared to engage students? What were the challenges and disruptions? What were the lessons learned that could be incorporated in remote as well as face-to-face instruction? These questions are worthy of interdisciplinary examination in higher education and place our work squarely within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) where course design, student learning, and content delivery are central (Becker & Andrews, 2004).

What we learned through our self-reflexive work is significant as it opened up an important set of considerations for our department to take up both during and *after* the global pandemic lifts and invites other academic units from a variety of higher education disciplines to do the same. With this, our study addresses each of the aforementioned questions. The terms remote learning and online learning are used interchangeably.

In Figure1, there are 12 multimedia strategies ranging from the creation of motivational and instructional videos to the implementation of nontraditional classroom tools like text messages. The most frequent mode of multimedia action was email, with over 1,700 email exchanges. The most telling element of Figure 1 is the 41 syllabi revisions. The rapid execution of adjusting teaching approaches demonstrates the commitment of the department to making changes based on observations and feedback about student and faculty real-time experiences. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory qualitative, phenomenological study is to provide a focal lens on to those direct lived experiences of students, faculty, and staff in SCOM during the COVID-19 pandemic to advance teaching and learning, thus demonstrating how this type of multimodal communication was used to assist students with the transition into an emergency remote learning environment to advance teaching and learning.

Literature and The Theory That Informed: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

HBCUs emerged more prominently during the Reconstruction Era and were established by supportive networks of Black churches, the Freedman's Bureau, missionaries, and philanthropists. The nation's first and oldest HBCU, Cheyney University, was established as an institute for higher learning in 1837 (Lovett, 2015). Education, from the beginning, was viewed as a community supported effort to encourage equality and social mobility for African descendants.

In today's society, HBCUs are doing more than maintaining and surviving. They continue to produce a disproportionate number of Black undergraduates in the United States compared to predominantly white institutions (PWIs). According to a 2017 report from the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), HBCUs awarded 17 percent of all bachelor's degrees to African Americans although they make up only three percent of all institutions of higher learning (p. 3).

During this era of technology, however, HBCUs have been slow to move toward online learning. Data in the Riggs study (2019) from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics in 2018 showed that approximately three quarters of students who attended public and private PWIs took online courses. Yet, Riggs found that while the number of online programs at HBCUs has increased, "it can be concluded that roughly only one third of 102 HBCUs" offer online courses (p. 15).

This then begs the question why as online education has steadily grown since the 1980s, HBCUs have not developed significant enough online courses to stay on pace with their counterpart PWIs. Riggs contended that the slow growth of online courses by HBCUs inhibits their competitiveness for students in a marketplace that clamors for growth in numbers. Outlining five threats to the surviving of HBCUs, she stated:

> The second threat references staying competitive with newer and innovative technology driven institutions, specifically referencing large for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix. This university targets a similar minority population through their use of state-of-the art technology. This threat exemplifies the struggles HBCUs have keeping up with the implementation of current technology infrastructure, training, equipment and support. For-profit institutions pour many resources into this area and consequently, gain access to a minority population that would normally attend an HBCU. (p. 3)

There appear to be two key reasons for the lag in developing online courses by HBCUs. Mitchell (2013, p. 26) argued that the current status of HBCUs' slow development of online courses lies in mission and money. First regarding financing, on a macro scale, HBCUs continue to be underfunded and understaffed. Despite efforts to counter a historical legacy of inequitable funding, HBCUs receive inadequate funding especially from state governments and private donations.

Second, in terms of the role that mission plays in their reception to online courses, traditionally HBCUs tout their personal and nurturing touch with students. Williams (2017) conducted a study on why students chose to attend an HBCU. Her results showed that the contributing factors were alumni, cost, cultural identity, legacy, and location. An example of the nature of HBCUs is evident in an observation by Williams who wrote about

a sign posted at MSU in 2015 that read: "Welcome to Morgan State University, where Black lives have always mattered! (p.85)."

In Fleming's (1984) often cited work administered to 1,529 HBCU undergraduates and 1,062 undergraduates, she found that HBCUs promoted greater development and interpersonal outcomes due to providing a supportive, encouraging, and nurturing environment. The concept of a supportive environment is seen throughout the literature as a key characteristic of the HBCU experience (Patton, 2011; Allen, 1992; Seifert, Drummond, & Pascarella, 2006). Hence, the HBCU supportive environment experience develops at the institutional level and is adopted and implemented and practiced throughout the administrative and classroom levels.

Arroyo and Gasman (2014) proposed an institution-focused HBCU-based conceptual framework specifically for advancing an educational approach committed to student success. Within the proposed framework, the authors posit that the foundation of HBCUs' contribution to Black student success is a supportive environment stating that "the environment moderates all other components and processes in the model" (p.64). A supportive environment is critical in the positive moderation of accessibility, affordability, identity formation, value cultivation, and achievement. Hembree et. al (2014) propose another institutional conceptual model with six constructs: spirituality, diversity, professionalism, inquiry, and technology. The first concept of spirituality pertains to one's "individual ability to form meaningful relationships, explore personal values, and find meaning in the world" (p.25). Arroyo and Gasman (2014) concluded that faculty members are the most crucial component of implementing this model effectively at the micro-level, which is the classroom. Faculty must be both dedicated and engaged in order to enact "holistic institutional conditions that facilitate student success" (p.75). Meaningful communities, the relationships that make up those communities, and a supportive environment that nurtures them are vital to the long-term sustainability of student success.

Learning is connected to a learner's participation within a community (Oliver & Carr, 2009; Sanders & Melton, 2010). In the context of remote learning, the supportive environment might exist in an immersive learning community, virtual community, or remote learning environment. With regards to online learning, a sense of community is often cited in the literature as a common theme. Sadera, Robertson, Song, and Midon (2009) described a community as "a group of participants in a distance-based environment with a shared purpose and the relationship among them including their sense of belonging, trust, and interaction" (p. 278). In the context of this study, the research is interested in exploring how the tenets of HBCU culture, namely community building and nurturing, are rendered in a

remote learning environment through the lived experiences and responses from students.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative, phenomenological study is to provide a focal lens onto the everyday lived experiences of students, faculty, and staff in SCOM during the COVID-19 pandemic to advance teaching and learning. A phenomenological perspective enables the researcher to take a pragmatic approach to explore the meaning-making processes of participating subjects. A phenomenological strategy provides deeper insight into the social meanings and everyday lived experiences related to this social group as "a phenomenological concern always has this twofold character: a preoccupation with both the concreteness (the ontic) as well as the essential nature (the ontological) of a lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p.40). Thus, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an appropriate method for this study as it focuses on the subjective experiences and first-hand interpretations of those directly impacted by the 2020 pandemic in SCOM.

Communication and the use of the interpretive phenomenological analysis framework invited a socially cohesive and collaborative learning environment to be formed during this emergency period of transitional learning. A multimodal approach to communication initiated by the department through surveys and questionnaires invited students to voice concerns and questions allowing faculty to adjust and respond in real time. In this way we acknowledged learners as experts of their own experience. The interpretive phenomenological analysis approach helped our team to learn most efficiently how participants were making sense of their social world and experiences by inviting their input very early and often throughout the emergency remote instruction transitional learning period. As IPA is concerned with the subjective account and meaning made by individuals, this approach speaks to the importance of using qualitative inquiry to gain insight into learners' experiences as a way for faculty to synthesize learner input in order to adapt the virtual learning environment.

Smith and Osborn (2007) postulated the "main currency for an IPA study [are] the meanings particular experiences, events, [and] states hold for participants" (p.53). By applying the systems to language and "at the same time relating language to social organization, role relationships, values and beliefs, and other shared patterns of knowledge," the researcher can detect important clues of shared meaning within groups by examining participant narratives (Misra, 2000, p.118). To better understand this shared system of meaning, the research team distributed a series of open-ended questions to participants. From there, a qualitative exploration of emerging themes among SCOM participants' experiences helped reveal their "certain way of being in the world" as it pertains to living and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Manen, 1990, p.41). Essentially, all of the qualitative inquiry is based on grounded theory. This approach suggests the theoretical

framework emerges through the process of analysis and is grounded in and "derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12). This theory works well with the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach as both an emphasis and inductive process which involves seeking patterns and engaging in an on-going comparison processes between individual cases analyzing for both similarity and difference, convergence, and divergence.

Method

Smith (2017) contended IPA researchers maintain an idiographic commitment of the phenomenon under investigation. Idiography examines individual cases highlighting the details of a given phenomenon through the lens of participants' perspectives. Therefore, IPA researchers provide detailed analysis for participant-specific transcripts, in this case, open-ended essay question responses, offering an idiographic perspective. To understand the challenges and lessons learned during emergency remote teaching during a pandemic, the research team analyzed each response from open-ended reflective questions from faculty, students, and staff to make specific statements about individuals' experiences and discover patterns of meaning embedded within the narratives explored. Through a content review of faculty reflections, emails, virtual meetings (with recordings), and surveys, four themes emerged about disruptions and challenges for our engagement with and instruction of students during the pandemic. In some instances, these challenges have also been confirmed by student comments from surveys. The challenges below are not listed in any order of prominence.

Overcoming Disruptions and Challenges

Challenge 1: Building the Ship as It's Moving. This challenge could be summarized as responding to fear with creativity and a willingness to make real-time (iterative) changes to the course to ensure student success. Literally, we as a staff left campus a day before the advent of spring break. Immediately that next week we took crash courses in remote learning – learning about apps and platforms like Canvas' Big Blue Button (Morgan's instructional platform), Panopto (video), Google Hangouts (now Meet), Zoom, and other services that could be of value to us in teaching our students. Students would be returning the next week for an adventure in this changed reality.

The department Chair notes that for the week of March 23 - the return of the students - we met every day to ask the basic questions: How are classes going? What feedback are students giving you? What is not working? What changes need to be made? How quickly can those changes be made? Each week became its semester of sorts. We looked at student data weekly: Canvas log-in rates, student work products, technology access, work schedules of students, and family health and wellness information. The

combined factors changed week-to-week. This meant that the teaching and learning strategies had to change weekly as well after we looked at student feedback, work products, and faculty evaluations of assignments.

Digital platforms that we originally thought would work well for the virtual meeting space for classes were rethought. Was Zoom going to be our go-to platform or Google Meet? It turned out this decision would have to be aligned with students' access to technology for the various classes. For example, one faculty member states that she was in love with Canvas' Big Blue Button, but her students not so much because they had problems accessing it on their phones. According to another faculty member, the decision to abruptly move to a remote teaching modality required a flight response by faculty to transform.

> *We had to redesign the course in a way that would allow students to continue to engage and feel like the course they were familiar with before the pandemic was still accessible… As it pertains to the course redesign, this proved to be a process that would have to be optimized in real-time, requiring compassionate flexibility that allowed for changes and adjustments to be made as we learned from our students' experiences.*

Faculty scaled down weekly tasks into modules, extending deadlines to accommodate different student home and work-life challenges, creating safe spaces for discussion during Zoom calls, and allowing students the space to articulate what was working and what adjustments could be made to improve the learning. As a department, we all adopted the value of compassionate flexibility and determination, responding and adjusting to improve the process. The various iterations were not all perfect, but it was a learning experience for everyone, allowing us to grow together. This building the ship as it was moving also required an asynchronous approach. Another faculty member recognized this when he states:

> *Some students were living in different time zones, so I had to manage working hours to help them. Since I had to check and grade around 70 students every week, I needed strong time management skills.*

This co-creative approach required regular communication throughout the semester and developing strategies to connect with students with varying levels of accessibility.

Challenge 2: Need for Multimodal Communication to Traverse Different Degrees of Student Accessibility. The emergency remote teaching space meant there was a need for faculty to develop and execute a multimodal approach to student communication in order to meet the demand of various levels of student accessibility. Consistent among faculty reflections was the use of various communication technologies from the telephone to Google Hangouts meetings. The department Chair highlights

one of the first academic institutional challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis -- the need for student communication and departmental availability:

> *I felt very burdened to be available to students at most hours of the day…this meant that I was always 'on' as Chair. In retrospect, I should have built-in more self-care time. However, again, I felt not being available to students would send the wrong signal, so I made myself available at all times.*

To balance the desire to ease student anxieties about the rapid changes, the department launched a website dedicated to student questions and concerns. In this way, through this online community, the department was communicating empathy, value, presence, and support. The Chair continues (Your GPS for Online Learning, 2020):

> *The site became a rallying point for SCOM majors to get information about how their SCOM classes would be conducted and what type of support they could expect from their faculty members. This site has been viewed over 800 times… [highlighting how successful] digital and social tools [are]to connect with students about important information that was vital to their success during the online learning period.*

The initiation of this space helped to create a social presence for the department allowing students to establish themselves within the new virtual community (Garrison, 2016).

Faculty narratives show consistent patterns of exploiting the affordances of networked spaces in order to reach students where they were during the pandemic and to simulate a more connected experience virtually. Two faculty members concurred that social media served as another communicative entry point for students, one stating:

> *All students were able to communicate with me through Instagram and Twitter chat simultaneously. I also hosted weekly online live meetings, and was able to help them without any difficulty.*

The ubiquitous nature of the internet and mobile accessibility provide several simultaneous interconnected pathways to interact across occupational, social, and educational spheres. The Director of Instruction recalls using text messaging as a way to drive synchronous class communication.

> *All of my students moved in and out of communication during our time online for a myriad of valid reasons. It was challenging to keep everyone on pace with the weekly class materials and discussions because of these gaps in communication, but I discovered that a group text chain worked best to get the majority of students to our Thursday synchronous class session and by the end of the semester, all were present - which I considered a big WIN!*

This approach, integrating asynchronous and synchronous tools, is tied to increasing student engagement and a sense of community (Abdelmalak, 2015, Pinsk et al., 2014).

In any social environment, a key part of communication is listening and responding to messages received. A faculty member's response reflects this common thread throughout faculty narratives - compassionate flexibility. This attribute worked in concert with communication as faculty made adjustments understanding that COVID-19 and the university closing did not just disrupt students' academic reality, but also their personal lives. Noted one professor:

> *With the economic challenges, one student lost his job and desperately worked to find another. A second student had to take on more hours for his employer. For these students, my work with them resulted in persistent individual follow-up and telephone meetings. For these two students, I was almost teaching an independent study class.*

Another faculty member recounts how this individualized approach impacted his course.

> *Many students were not able to play Panopto video lectures due to incompatible PC and cell phone specifications. Moreover, they were not able to access online live meetings due to poor internet connection. Therefore, I provided very detailed PowerPoint lecture slides three days before class.*

The multimodal communication approach allowed students to access learning through different modalities and helped to foster a sense of community and connection during the emergency remote instruction period.

Challenge 3: Sustaining Student Motivation. In the days leading up to remote learning, faculty heard from students the concerns that would lead them to believe that motivation would be challenging, but we were determined to push back hard against their feelings of being overwhelmed. Here is what students said in their own words as contained in quotes from responses to a survey conducted by the department near the end of the semester (SCOMUPMSU, 2020).

> *Once the pandemic started, I lost one job but became an 'essential worker' at the other one. It's honestly been very tiring having to work every day in order to make money.*
>
> *I have family that has died and also are sick along with friends that have been sick.*
>
> *The biggest challenge was overcoming my depression.*

[It was] Adjusting to working from home while caring for my two small children, one school-aged.

I just want to finish my last four classes and call it a day. I don't care about walking for graduation.

The Chair's insights saw this challenge before it was manifested, spurring him to outline and implement strategies to mitigate student concerns and facilitate engagement.

Pandemic or not, at the end of the day, my job was still to ensure successful student outcomes at the end of the semester. Since it seemed that reassurance was the most important job, based on the available student data, I launched a student-oriented campaign, 'No worries. We got you covered.' Before we could focus on learning - we had to focus on student welfare and reassure them.

One of the first things I learned when it was announced that the university would be going online back in early March was that there was a lot of genuine fear and anxiety expressed by our majors. I must have received about 20 calls and texts asking about how online learning would work when the university announced that classes were canceled starting the Wednesday of spring break and that students would not be returning to campus after spring break. The questions: How would classes be conducted? What would happen to grading? Would students be able to graduate on time? Students were concerned that they had not taken an online class before. But beyond that, there was a general sense that the world as they knew it was falling apart.

The Director of Instruction reported that her students struggled with feeling fully engaged with the class as they missed the interactions they had grown accustomed to before the emergency move online as well as felt overwhelmed with the new type of workload and schedule that ERT (emergency remote teaching) that Morgan required.

I met this challenge by allowing the first 10 minutes of our weekly synchronous class session to be solely about 'checking in.' Students could converse about their lives, the course, what they were doing to cope with being mandated to stay in their homes, or anything else that was on their mind. This predictable time was very helpful and I think we all looked forward to it. I remember that one day students just took the time to show each other what their 'view' looked like from the rooms where their computers were. That was a great deal of fun!

One faculty member recounts that on a number of occasions students requested Zoom or Google Meet sessions with her purportedly to talk about their work. She said she readily agreed; however, once the meetings began, she realized that their concerns were not so much about their work but rather that they just wanted to have someone to talk with about what was going on in their life – an adult or real grown-up, meaning not someone their age. Once we had "the talk," they moved forward to regroup and complete assignments. This speaks to the way in which multimodal communication was used to transition the high touch HBCU culture into an online environment.

Challenge 4: Overcoming Hurdles to Learn New Technologies and Ways to Promote Learning. The global educational crisis, brought on by COVID-19, presented faculty with an opportunity to accelerate growth in using technology to enhance learning environments. Common among faculty was a shared sentiment in the value of life-long learning. The Director of Instruction explains how asynchronously available digital resources helped her create technology-enriched learning environments quickly.

> *I was a student again once we moved online! I must have attended nearly 10 different webinars to learn online/remote teaching innovations. And I have a long list of apps (Loom, Panopto, PlayFactile - Virtual Jeopardy) and websites (ACUE, Perusall, OpenSource) to continue to use moving forward…I grew as a professor. I feel better, think I will teach better, and cannot wait to meet my next group of students this summer (online) and in the fall!*

Another faculty member articulates a group-supported belief that technologies are only as valuable as their ability to foster the learning experience for students.

> *I employed Panopto video and Canvas video but they were not as engaging as I had hoped. Webinars and video reflections with attached rubrics worked better, especially with my practicum class.*

A third professor mentioned how this experience has allowed him to access more resources and will shape the direction of future courses.

> *Remote teaching has taught me how to manage online courses fluently. Before the pandemic, I did not know that there are so many ways to collect useful teaching materials. I have always struggled to find updated teaching resources, but all SCOM faculty members have helped me to use free online resources for students. During the semester, I have collected free teaching resources from the internet and was able to update all lecture slides before each class session. Now, I am familiar with using different types of online meeting tools, such as Google Hangouts and Zoom, and can manage Canvas without any problems.*

The emergency remote learning environment provided a space for both students and faculty to learn and explore new ways of education beyond the traditional constraints of space and time. By conducting an interpretive phenomenological analysis, we were able to see how iterative communication through various modes helped us adjust in informed ways during a pivotal transitional learning period.

Lessons for Living and Learning in a Pandemic

Our exploratory study has various implications for educators at all levels who face a sudden shift into emergency remote teaching from traditional teaching due to situations like the outbreak of coronavirus. After reviewing and synthesizing the lived experiences of students, staff, and faculty, four preliminary lessons for living and learning in a global pandemic emerged.

Lesson 1: Establish community early. As an academic department, the results illustrated the importance of creating an online identity and presence that enabled seamless student communication and department accessibility. A sense of community in both online and on-campus settings has academic and social benefits for students which include deeper learning and enhanced emotional well-being. (Kwapy, 2014, Rovai, 2003, Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). We leveraged the digital sphere by transferring our community early and providing a space for students to foster virtual connectedness with faculty, staff, and each other.

> *The professors were with us every step of the way. Quick email response time, impromptu Zooms to help me understand questions and regular conversations with professors.* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

> *I now have a different outlook on my role as the administrative assistant for SCOM. My outlook is just not an administrative assistant. The pandemic has made me look at my position as a leader and role model.* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

Lesson 2: Show Compassion. As a historically black university, the high-touch approach involved in teaching the "whole person" and investing in our students was already an enculturated value. Thus, we learned how to translate teaching holistically in this way within the emergency remote teaching space. Teaching must always be connected to what students are experiencing. It was important not to bombard students with only lecture material and uploaded educational content but to also exercise empathy and understanding toward the various experiences with trauma a global pandemic might present.

> *I truly enjoyed how we all came together; my professors were very understanding and they often checked in on us.* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

> *It occurred to me at that moment, that while academic concerns were the impetus for the questions, students really wanted some reassurances that we would be looking out for them in this new experience and that we would be with them every step of the way. Because we are an HBCU known for high-touch practices, I knew it was important to replicate some of our high-touch practices during remote learning.* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

Lesson 3: Empower Learners. Community engagement and community-based participation are key. There must be a continuum of co-creation during the course giving learners agency, flexibility, and responsibility to impact the learning ecology (Bovill, 2020). Faculty have to be agile in order to organize the learning for students in a way that is responsive and reflexive to learner input. The process for collegiate instruction going forward will be collaborative and iterative as faculty engage in a dialogic exchange with students in order to bring about human-centered learning solutions that enable them to immerse in the learning material and connect with each other.

> *My professors (actually) listened to what we wanted and needed and accommodated accordingly.* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

> *I used the Growth Mindset™ model for my general communications course, which incorporates a commitment to exploring new ways to learn. The video was essential for this class and the Kanopy™ website was invaluable for content that allowed students to critically think.* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

Lesson 4: Keep Growing Digitally. A teaching and learning focus prepared SCOM faculty to pivot quickly and drove continual growth throughout the pandemic as faculty regularly attended webinars, virtual workshops, and conferences to enhance their skills in real-time. They anticipate continuing to explore new technologies and embrace the affordances of collaborative knowledge exchange, co-creation, and co-innovation made accessible through various digital applications and platforms.

> *"I became quite comfortable with filming myself through this teaching experience...I realized that through video, I was stepping into the daily world of my students where the video is their language and really well-done ones had currency in their world. I understand this has pedagogical value now."*

> *"I used social media as a tool for real-time communication. All students were able to communicate with me through Instagram and Twitter chat simultaneously! Wow!"* (Voices of SCOM, 2020)

Conclusion

As this article has illustrated, the culture of the Department of Strategic Communication is one that includes a healthy combination of risk and reward, innovation and reflection, teaching, and learning for all of its organizational members. There could be no more challenging context to put these best practices to a stress (and strength) test, than what the COVID-19 global pandemic and emergency remote instruction presented. From our roles as department Chair to Director of Instruction (both tenured senior faculty in the department) to junior tenure-track faculty, the department administrative assistant and the students, the heart of the department, this article brings all of our voices together and focuses on what we collectively found valuable and considered a success during this unique experience. This is the culminating departmental report of our work along with examples of student-faculty interactions and digital strategies mentioned above showing high value results (SCOMUP, 2020).

This is an exploratory research study and thus the findings of this research have to be seen in the light of some limitations. As mentioned earlier, this is the narrative of one department's experience and due to this, we caution the propensity to overgeneralize these findings across the educational landscape. This study leaves the room, however, to explore how this phenomenon was experienced in other higher education institutions in the Maryland area, perhaps across other disciplines. These results may also encourage more avenues of research in support of finding ways to advance historically black colleges and universities toward more aggressively pursuing online course instruction and finding new ways to translate the high touch factor in the virtual learning environment. Also, investigating the data from a quantitative angle may provide more insight into the different ways educators can quickly and effectively enter into the emergency remote teaching space. Additionally, there are implications from the study that could be helpful, especially to other communications programs as they are pivoting to remote learning during emergencies. The findings endorse the theory of interpretative phenomenological analysis of a pragmatic approach to learning through lived experiences. We as a department will adopt co-creative learning and continue to explore the evidence for instruction in all of our courses, face-to-face, and online.

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