

Online Teaching in a Time of Crisis

Social Capital and Community Building Tools

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Abstract—We draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the sociology of education and introduce the idea of building social capital and community in the often misunderstood, one-sided narrative of online learning, which is seen as both an isolated and isolating experience. We also look at educational praxis, which is “informed, committed action,” to address socially differentiated educational attainment, which is perceived to be more pronounced in online learning. To investigate this, we performed a narrative analysis of qualitative data from student evaluations of three online asynchronous courses taught within the past two years, where we introduced regular synchronous sessions. Our findings indicate that synchronous sessions, especially during the pandemic, were perceived by students as a cornerstone of a pedagogy of care. Furthermore, the data suggest that these sessions work better than fully asynchronous courses for students prone to lower educational attainment due to uncontrollable conditions (e.g., socioeconomic status, race) because of the additional layer of support. Finally, our findings indicate that these sessions represent an effective way for students to build social capital and community in courses that are otherwise fully asynchronous.

Keywords—distance education, online engagement, community building

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit hard and interrupted many dimensions of our lives, particularly education. In the fall of 2020, within weeks of reopening, many universities in the United States had reported clusters of cases, forcing schools to frantically backtrack on their plans of reopening face-to-face and suspend in-person classes. At that time and throughout the pandemic, many have argued that learning outcomes often disappoint with online courses and that virtual instruction runs counter to the most important asset at a major university—personal interaction with peers and highly qualified experts. Our goal in this paper is to tackle the often misunderstood, one-sided narrative of online learning, which is seen as both an isolated and isolating experience, and to refute these misconceptions. In doing so, we introduce the idea of online courses as a platform to build social capital, community, and resilience—fundamental elements of education, especially during times of crisis.

First, we want to clarify a significant difference between what has been practiced during the pandemic and *online education*. Findings from the most extensive cross-country research study undertaken during the pandemic suggest that the practices employed during this time fall under the umbrella of *emergency remote education*, which is significantly different from planned pedagogical modalities such as distance education, online learning, or other derivations [1]. The fundamental difference between *emergency remote education* and *distance education* is that the latter is an option, while the former is an obligation. Such an understanding is crucial because misconceptions in definitions lead to misconceived practices. On the one hand, distance education is a planned activity, and its implementation is grounded in theoretical and practical knowledge specific to the field and its nature. On the other hand, emergency remote education is about surviving as a form of crisis management with all resources available, whether offline or online.

Moreover, distance education “is not simply a geographical separation of learners and teachers, but, more importantly, is a pedagogical concept” [2, p. 22]. In contrast, the crash nature of emergency remote education inevitably results in its weakness in theoretical underpinning and is far from being a pedagogical concept in its own right. More importantly, in terms of learning outcomes, distance education, as a practice, has already proved its validity and value [3], and research shows no difference in learning outcomes between distance education and face-to-face education [4]. The pragmatic nature of distance education allows practitioners to use working solutions for learners and defends the view that the field should provide educational opportunities for individuals who are “vulnerable to unequal developments” [5, p. 510].

Second, in addition to the profound and global impact of the pandemic on our social, economic, and political lives, COVID-19 has also affected individuals emotionally and psychologically [6]. Surviving during the pandemic has required building support communities, sharing tools and knowledge, and listening to different voices. While it was advised that we keep our social distance, it meant keeping the spatial distance, not the transactional distance [7].

Waddingham [8] argues that “overwhelmed by the scale of things that are happening” (p. 104), we had to look after each other and make each other feel that nobody was alone in those traumatic times. Social media was essential in facilitating a space where educators could meet, share, and exchange knowledge. While these support communities were crucial for us to collaborate and support each other, students similarly needed care, affection, and support. Although students were encouraged to self-organize to build community and support systems, from an educational perspective, providing support communities for students is a vital obligation because many people are psychologically overwhelmed and in need of assistance from those who are better prepared and able to cope with the pandemic’s implications in education [1].

Uncertainty characterized this period of human existence, and with the resulting anxiety and trauma that students and instructors alike have experienced, the theme of a pedagogy of care has surfaced within educational institutions. However, it is essential to recognize that, although the theme of care in education has been popularized during the crisis, it is a crucial element in learning that has always been needed and will continue to be essential long after COVID-19 [9]. Thus, we argue that it is important to create online spaces where people can support each other. Our goal in the following sections

is to show that adding regular synchronous sessions to otherwise asynchronous online courses represents an effective way to create that nurturing environment, especially for teaching analytic and research-based subjects, which are more difficult to teach online than in traditional settings and where students need more support.

2 A pedagogy of care

The emotional ramifications resulting from the trauma caused by the pandemic required intentional course design and teaching practices that embody care, inclusion, compassion, and empathy as core values [10]. A caring approach to education pushes us to recognize and address the diversity of student experiences and vulnerabilities, allowing us to be more receptive to the assumed needs of students, as well as their expressed and individual needs. Such an approach requires a course structure and teaching practices that go beyond academia, prioritizing students' emotional and psychological development and needs, especially during times of crisis. Concerned Academics [11] outlined in "Social Pedagogy" an approach that is "consultative, inclusive, and sensitive to the contexts of students, teachers and their communities. [This approach] works toward a mutually supportive framework that will carry our pedagogic work through the current crisis, into a period of just recovery, and a more equitable future."

In terms of students' interpersonal exchanges with peers and faculty members, earlier research shows that emotions play a significant role in the online learning experience [12] and that the online learning context is robust enough to allow for caring relations to emerge *at even a deeper level* than that experienced in face-to-face contexts [13]. As a result, several researchers have investigated design elements and pedagogical practices that can enhance emotional sensitivity and support the development of caring relations in online learning [13, 14, 15, 16]. We did the same and embarked on a two-year experiment where we added regular synchronous sessions to our otherwise asynchronous online courses.

An essential aspect of a pedagogy of care is listening to students by engaging in open and authentic dialogue—particularly marginalized and disadvantaged students struggling with the compounded effects of the already existing inequities in educational settings. In turn, this makes some students prone to have socially differentiated (i.e., lower) levels of educational attainment (i.e., low retention/lower graduation rates and longer times to degree completion) due to uncontrollable conditions like socioeconomic status and race. It follows, then, that another critical part of a pedagogy of care is providing additional and more substantial support structures to address these concerns and challenges [11, 17]. In doing so, we need to understand learners as individuals in their personal, social, economic, and political environments—beyond their role as learners in a classroom/lecture hall.

For example, Lambert's Six Critical Dimensions model incorporates learner diversity and agency into online learning processes with an understanding of students' skills, support, and learning materials that empower rather than reinforce existing inequalities [18]. In understanding the lived experiences of learners, education strategies need to be adapted to ensure that no learner is left behind or further

disadvantaged. Approaches and practices such as personal connections, reciprocity of caring, and student-centered course design and teaching have already shown great potential in nurturing and maintaining a climate of care online [13, 15, 16]. Techniques for online course design must go beyond content delivery and assigning tasks for assessment purposes; instructors ought to intentionally create spaces where learners learn together in groups (social constructivism), a reimagination of digital informal social spaces (sometimes called third places) that foster connections like playgrounds or cafeterias [19]—places that make school enjoyable for students and create a venue for building social capital. To this end, we argue that adding synchronous sessions to otherwise asynchronous online courses represents one effective way for students to build social capital and a sense of community and belonging, especially when teaching analytic and research-based subjects.

3 Building on Bourdieu's framework

To understand students' determinants of success in distance education, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice [20] and his conceptualization of capital, habitus, and field. Bourdieu used the term *habitus* to describe an individual's unique characteristics: their tastes, perceptions, or ways of responding and thinking [21]. He was interested in how habitus both shapes and is shaped by practice. *Field* describes an area of practice characterized by an internal struggle for limited power or resources [20, 21, 22]. Power distribution can be understood by considering the notion of *capital* or what is valued within the field [23]. Capital is an acquired form of power or influence, taking many forms, all of which are ultimately resources that can be exploited. The academic skills developed during the program of study, and the confidence in using them, represent forms of embodied cultural capital. Other relevant examples of capital include social networks (social capital); valuable objects and materials (objectified capital), such as the qualification itself; and the association of value through the reputation of an awarding institution (institutionalized capital), such as a university.

It follows, then, that changes in habitus convey changes in dispositions and capacities from which practices are adapted and developed and which, in turn, enhance the participants' agency within their fields. Therefore, learning involves developing the required habitus for successful operation within a particular field. Schatzki [24, p. 29] noted, "the more the habitus is acquired, the better someone can proceed in these fields, and in a greater range of situations." However, it is imperative to recognize that individuals do not simply acquire these capacities and dispositions; they are caught up in other forms of capital that are brought about by understandings of the institution and accreditation of qualifications (institutionalized capital), as well as the social connections generated through enrolment and engagement with the program (social capital).

Bourdieu's theory of practice emphasizes a dialectic relationship between habitus and field. As Bourdieu explains, "The habitus and the field maintain a relationship of mutual attraction, and the illusion (*illusio*) is determined from the inside, from impulses that push toward a self-investment in the object; but it is also determined from the outside, starting with a particular universe of objects offered socially for investment"

[25, p. 512]. In other words, habitus does not just mirror an individual's social position but is shaped by subjective (e.g., a student's intrinsic motivation or desires) and objective (e.g., societal structures like higher education systems) forces. These forces form an individual's perception of possibilities and "imposes a particular mode on desire" [25, p. 512–513]. In the context of this study, this suggests that students' dispositions and the arrangement of the higher education system shape their practices when entering our programs.

Also crucial to the concept of "field" is that capital has different values within different fields. For example, Bourdieu states that "in a particular field, the properties, internalized in dispositions or objectified in economic or cultural goods, which are attached to agents are not all simultaneously operative; the specific logic of the field determines those which are valid in this market, which are pertinent and active in the game in question" [26 p. 113]. In other words, students' practices when entering our programs are related to the specific composition of capital they possess. In the context of higher education, students' educational capital, a sub-form of cultural capital [26], is likely to be pertinent to shaping their practice.

Moreover, Bourdieu [20] conceived of people (in our case, students) as vying against each other within a *field* for different forms of capital and status. However, students can acquire capital within their field by using programs to generate valuable social networks. In this last issue, the chief tension arises in Bourdieu's position: significant value comes from developing supportive partnerships and networks and participating in a community of learners. We focus on these aspects in this study—the social capital students can acquire through engagement with their program as a critical component to developing their habitus.

In addition, Bourdieu's Theory of Practice [20] also offers a lens for understanding why different student groups display different practices when entering our programs. Such knowledge can be worthwhile to educators so they can engage in educational praxis and, in doing so, demonstrate commitment to expanding higher education access to student groups with diverse educational resources. Next, we introduce the idea of educational praxis and argue that we can use it in distance education to influence students' development of social capital, which is a critical ingredient in forming their habitus. We also argue that using educational praxis to help students develop social capital is critical for their resilience, which is always needed but especially important during times of crisis.

4 Educational praxis

Praxis is a Greek word that means moving back and forth critically between reflecting and acting on the world. Because reflection alone does not produce change, Freire [27] advocated for the necessity of action based on reflection. Policy praxis involves inductive and deductive forms of reasoning. It also involves dialogue as a social process to dismantle "oppressive structures and mechanisms prevalent both in education and society" [28, p. 383]. Critical, transformative leaders enter and remain in education not to carry on business as usual but to work for social change and social justice [29, 30, 31]. Unfortunately, Rapp, Silent, and Silent [32] found that 90% of

educational leaders, both practitioners and faculty members, remained wedded to what Scott and Hart [33] call technical drifting—a commitment to emphasize and act on the technical components of one’s work above the moral. Technical drifters fail to validate the cultural, intellectual, and emotional identities of people from underrepresented groups; they avoid situations where their values, leadership styles, and professional goals are challenged and dismantled, and they use their positions of power to reaffirm their own professional choices.

Given the devastating impact of the pandemic, prioritizing the issues of care, empathy, and emotional/psychological support in the classroom setting and targeted towards students became critical. Thus, our goal as educators has been to engage in *educational praxis*, which involves “morally informed and committed action” that “helps to shape social formations and conditions” [34, p. 10]. Amid a chaotic and unprecedented time, we wanted to create more than an online class: we imagined a community of care that could transcend the limits of distance education and the pandemic itself. We posited that adding regular synchronous sessions to our established online courses that are otherwise asynchronous, especially in graduate-level analytic and research-based subjects, will help in two ways:

1. Create social capital, community, and resilience—ingredients that are hugely beneficial to students’ *habitus* development, thus implicitly beneficial to their operating in their respective fields.
2. Level the field of socially differentiated educational attainment (due to preexisting conditions like students’ socioeconomic status and race) is perceived to be more pronounced in online learning.

Furthermore, we thought that, if we could help instructors and students build social capital and community online, we could help further dispel the myths and misconceptions about online education.

5 Findings

We used a case study approach to analyze online graduate-level courses from three master’s programs in Policy Studies (*Social and Public Policy, Community and Economic Development, Work and Labor Policy*). We employed a narrative analysis of student perceptions about the newly added synchronous sessions; these student perceptions were drawn from course evaluations in three online courses—*Research Methods, Public Policy Analysis, and Capstone Project*—taught between January 2020 and December 2021. The student evaluations were anonymous and included the following open-ended question: *In your opinion, what was the best aspect of this course?* Out of those students who answered this question, each mentioned the synchronous sessions in one way or another. For the number of students categorized by term of study and the response rate to this question, see Table 1. We organized our findings around the common themes identified in our narrative analysis. A few selected examples are included with each theme for illustrative purposes.

Table 1. Number of students and response rate each term

Academic Term	Number of Students	Response Rate	Academic Term	Number of Students	Response Rate
Spring 2020	32	28.12%	Spring 2021	74	31.08%
Summer 2020	20	25.0%	Summer 2021	27	48.15%
Fall 2020	48	25.0%	Fall 2021	49	36.73%

5.1 Common themes

Student perceptions indicated that participants had varying degrees of familiarity and understanding with the synchronous sessions. Most of them indicated that they considered these sessions to provide a high level of supportive learning and understanding of complex material. They also saw these sessions as a *social gap* filler, fostering their socio-cognitive development by providing them with an incredible sense of community and belonging. Due to their interactive mode, participants indicated that these sessions empowered them through a creative and engaging learning environment. A most fascinating and surprising finding is that synchronous sessions greatly benefited students with learning disabilities. While we are unaware of the number of students with these disabilities in our courses, the data we collected rely on students self-identifying as such while mentioning this helpfulness. Moreover, our programs serve a large population of students reliant on financial aid, which may suggest that many of our students are likely to be prone to socially differentiated/lower educational attainment because of prior conditions like socioeconomic status and race. To this end, our findings indicate that students who generally struggled more than others found these synchronous sessions vital in their learning process and progress by providing an additional layer of support to their independent, asynchronous learning.

Theme 1. Synchronous sessions provide a high level of supportive learning and understanding of complex material. Extracts from students’ narrative comments reveal how the synchronous sessions fostered participants’ intellectual competence to enhance and advance their learning of the course content. Student-led sharing of questions and discussions during these sessions displayed students’ willingness to be more open and interested in engaging with others in the learning process.

Extract 1. I wanted to thank you for the support over the past two semesters—you have been more supportive and responsive than any other professor and it is much appreciated. Truly—you’re the only one who has offered the time for live classes and encouragement when, we as students, have been challenged and in need of that guidance with our education. The live sessions to explain the homework assignments were super helpful. This is my sixth course with [college name] and it’s the first time I’ve had any facetime with a professor.

Extract 2. The best aspect of this course were the online meeting sessions. The professor took an hour or more of their time to video chat the students and provide help with homework and other assignments. There was not one question [the professor] did not answer! [The professor] made me more confident with their continuous support. Thank you so much for the online sessions, they proved invaluable in order to understand and subsequently complete the homework!

Extract 3. The live sessions were extremely helpful for me to fully grasp the concepts, and they gave me confidence when it came time to work on the midterm and final. The online session was so informative and really set me on the right path! You do an awesome job of making difficult concepts understandable!!

Extract 4. [The professor] did live online sessions going over our assignments in depth before they were due. It was extremely helpful, and [the professor] explains things so well for us to understand. [Professor's] teaching style is amazing. I loved it. Even though the coursework was a bit tough, [the professor] makes it very understandable and is helpful in any way when you need it.

Theme 2. Synchronous sessions foster socio-cognitive capital through collaborative learning. Analysis of student narrative evaluations showed that some participants had articulated instances that curtailed their ability to develop their learning, including attempts to participate in all asynchronous activities to gain some interaction with their peers. More precisely, participants reported that the asynchronous mode lacked the social interaction they needed for a sense of belonging to a class and a “community” of learners. Although they were occasionally assigned group work, this was completed asynchronously to accommodate each other's schedules. Hence, students' narratives pointed to synchronous sessions as filling in their social aspect of learning and their lived experiences as students in a virtual community, which they indicated would have been impossible without those synchronous sessions. Even though some had limited time to participate, they valued the quality of these synchronous sessions. Furthermore, student narratives suggest that these sessions offered opportunities to socialize collaboratively with other students and with the instructor. Ultimately, this synchronous interactive learning experience seems to foster cognitive development through collaboration, making students feel less alone throughout the learning process than in solely asynchronous learning environments.

Extract 1. This is by far the BEST class I have taken at [college name] yet. I thoroughly enjoyed [professor's name] teaching style and think the professor has nailed an effective format for asynchronous online learning. My favorite part was the live sessions the professor hosted reviewing the assignments and taking questions. Online school can feel isolating, and it was so good to get instant responses to questions, have something explained verbally, and hear from the other students in the course. It allowed me to realize that I was on the same track and that my fellow students had the same questions as I did.

Extract 2. This course is a difficult one online. [The professor] took a lot of time to do sessions online so we could interact with her and the other students. Those sessions were extremely helpful. Thank you for hosting these classes, I absolutely loved them. I didn't realize how much I missed the dynamic of a live class, and I understood the topic you were discussing so much better!

Extract 3. [The professor] took time to have office hours during the semester which provided a much-needed connection with classmates during these challenging times. I really enjoyed our live classes; it was nice to receive instruction that was more interactive than just the online format and getting to know my instructor and fellow classmates.

Extract 4. I liked the actual live meeting/discussions that were held—it was nice to have real discussions, instead of through [the Learning Management System]. I really,

really enjoyed the live classes. It was awesome to actually have the professor explain the material. It was very helpful that there were these opportunities.

Theme 3. Synchronous sessions represent an empowering tool for creating an engaging environment. Another emergent theme from the data was that, although synchronous sessions may be considered a regular task or maybe even a slight burden in the schedule for some students, most participants agreed that these sessions empowered them to create an engaging environment. Higher attendance levels at these sessions led to more engagement and the creation of a more interactive learning environment.

Extract 1. I cannot emphasize enough the importance your clear explanations in the live classes play in my comprehension of this material. The second review class was just as helpful and informative as the first one. I appreciate the level of care you demonstrate toward students. You promote learning while empowering the class. This is a rare talent in a professor, and a gift to students. I loved that you held live office hours. In addition, [the professor] made the class very engaging and fun.

Extract 2. Coming from an educator perspective—[professor’s name] is a really great teacher! I loved the live discussions—this was a refreshing change from the written discussions in [the Learning Management System] that other courses do—I wish all courses did this instead! I really enjoyed the online sessions scheduled to help students with homework. These sessions made the lectures more understandable and helped me to see how the course connected to my degree.

Extract 3. The best aspect of this course were the online meeting sessions. [The professor] took an hour or more of her time to video chat her students and provide help with homework and other assignments. There was not one question [the professor] did not answer! [The professor] made me more confident with [their] continuous support.

Extract 4. Please continue to offer live classes, it is so helpful! [The professor] was the first one in the program to offer live classes online! It was great, I just wish there were more courses like [theirs]. Having live and interactive classes is amazing; it made me feel like almost being in class!

Theme 4. Synchronous sessions are beneficial for students with learning disabilities. Only a few students highlighted this finding; however, this discovery is invaluable for this research. Online programs are primarily being offered to meet the needs of non-traditional students, who are busy with their personal and professional obligations and find it difficult to add an even heavier schedule to their lives; as such, asynchronous programs appeal precisely to this kind of student population. However, incorporating optional synchronous sessions into these programs adds a “spice” to students’ learning experience and drives the ideas home. Importantly, these sessions are deemed extremely valuable for students who self-identify with a learning disability by providing an additional layer of support.

Extract 1. My personal favorite aspect of the course is the “flipped classroom” model. [Professor’s name] posts slide shows and recorded lectures, then holds online group sessions where we discuss the concepts we have learned on our own. This is a fantastic learning format that I feel works best for me as an adult learner with some minor learning disabilities. This allows me to set my own pace while knowing my professor is available live at regular intervals for any questions or clarification.

Extract 2. The live meetings that were incorporated into this course were so detailed and thorough, it solidified my opinion that [name of professor] is an excellent professor.

In the world that we find ourselves in, those live online classes saved me both educationally and personally ... for lack of a better word, it sucks to not have much human contact. [The professor] made this class not only a little easier to understand, but enjoyable!

Extract 3. The video office hours reminded me of the value of live collective class discussion and the insight that can be achieved through verbal instruction. As someone with a learning disability who has always had to overcompensate to succeed academically, [professor's name] teaching style, clear and concise communication/organization and thoughtful manner during the live sessions have allowed me the opportunity to enjoy the learning process.

Extract 4. I am very grateful to be your student. I came to this course with a great deal of anxiety over material that felt over my head and beyond my grasp. What I am experiencing is a learning environment that is encouraging, open, and strengths-based. Your explanation of the material during live sessions is clear and concise. You encourage questions and answer them completely and with grace. Learning this material is much like studying a second language, it requires practice, patience, and diligence. With your knowledge and keen communication skills, I am feeling comfortable with all that I am learning.

Theme 5. Synchronous learning is beneficial for struggling students. Struggling students find the synchronous sessions the most helpful for their learning because they provide an environment whereby conversations, discussions, and learning happen in the live interactive mode. Many students indicated that these sessions made them much more comfortable with the otherwise demanding coursework.

Extract 1. Really appreciated the evening sessions and being able to engage with the professor—helped to bring life to a topic I was terrified of! At first, I didn't think I would ever understand this, but through study, and most importantly your very clear explanations in the review class, I feel comfortable with this material now. I appreciate you!

Extract 2. I appreciate your time during the live classes. I know you will say it is your job and you are correct, but you do your job with what I believe is true care and concern for your students. The online sessions were very helpful—I could not have completed the assignments without them. The live video course discussions were perfect. In a way, [the professor] was not only a professor but also a tutor.

Extract 3. With these weekly online classes, you made a difficult subject bearable and understandable. You are very patient and caring. I know that it is time consuming, but I think that these live sessions help tremendously, and especially those who may need extra help. I found the live sessions critical to my success.

Extract 4. [The professor] conducted live sessions which were very useful in clarifying some challenging concepts. [The professor] was extremely friendly and personable and was very open to questions and feedback. The live sessions were imperative to getting me to understand the difficult concepts, especially the statistics portion. I really enjoyed your teaching style. It made a lifelong right-brainer truly understand and grasp analytical concepts essential to policy work!

6 Conclusion

Findings from this two-year experiment consisting of adding regular synchronous sessions to otherwise fully asynchronous online courses indicate that a combination of synchronous sessions with asynchronous work and discussions seems to work better for adult learners, students with learning disabilities, and students prone to lower educational attainment (due to uncontrollable conditions like socioeconomic status and race affecting retention/graduation rates and time to degree completion). These students benefit from the added layer of support they encounter in these sessions. Our findings also suggest that synchronous sessions empower students and provide an effective way to build community and social capital, which students claim cannot be achieved online through asynchronous work only. We have shown earlier that social capital and community-building elements are intrinsic to students' habitus development and how well they will operate in their respective fields. Finally, our findings indicate that synchronous sessions are strongly connected with a pedagogy of care for students.

Thus, upon reflection on the findings presented here, we believe that non-traditional students getting their degrees online can become more competitive in their fields by building social capital and community during their studies. It follows, then, that programs should function as sites of nurture and mutual support, which may be best facilitated by pedagogies that actively work towards lasting and valuable relationships and fostering a collaborative culture. We have shown that one effective way to do that is by adding regular synchronous sessions to otherwise asynchronous online courses, especially for analytic and research-based subjects, which are more difficult to teach online than in traditional settings and where students need more support.

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