Promoting Quality E-Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic via an Award-Winning Webinar Series for Faculty Transitioning to Teaching Online

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Abstract—During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Columbia University’s School of Social Work created a webinar series to support faculty who had to quickly transition to online teaching without prior e-learning experience. The award-winning series was freely open to all faculty anywhere, and shared the School’s expertise from running a high quality online master’s degree program and intensive online faculty training institute. This article describes the series’ goals, planning, logistics, sessions, and impact.

Keywords—e-learning, distance learning, online education, emergency remote teaching, faculty development, teaching during COVID-19, keep teaching, trauma-informed teaching and learning, inclusive online teaching, online student engagement, open source

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Introduction to This Webinar Series

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, Columbia University, like most other academic institutions in the United States and around the world, took the dramatic step of switching its entire campus to online instruction in a matter of days [1]. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment in distance education in higher education was steadily increasing, with 31.6% of all students in the United States having enrolled in at least one distance course in Fall 2016 [2], up from 9.7% of all students in Fall 2002 [3], but these percentages show that most students in the United States had not taken an online course prior to the pandemic. Professors had to make the move to online instruction extremely quickly while under incredible stress, which was difficult as most were accustomed to a face-to-face learning environment and had never taught in a virtual format.

Because Columbia University School of Social Work (CSSW) has offered a fully online Master’s of Science in Social Work degree [4] for many years, the School’s Online Campus administration was able to support instructors making this move at CSSW and around the world. We needed to support the School’s residential instructors moving to remote teaching online, and decided to open up the training freely to any educator in the world. Therefore, we hosted a free 4-part webinar series for faculty anywhere transitioning to teaching online due to COVID-19 that covered the basics of online student engagement, trauma-informed teaching and learning, inclusive online teaching, and a panel of instructors with experience teaching both online and in physical classrooms. Making our expertise in online education freely available was a match with the University’s mission to “advance knowledge and learning at the highest level and to convey the products of its efforts to the world” [5] and the School’s mission to "enhance well-being and promote human rights and social justice at the local, national, and global level" and to seek “academic relationships with many countries and regions” [6].

This series was honored by the International E-Learning Association with a 2020 International E-Learning Award in their Academic Division, Blended Learning Category [7] and by the University Continuing Professional Education Association (UPCEA) with a 2020 Crisis Management Marketing Award.

B. Supports for Faculty Transitioning to Online Teaching

As universities began transitioning to emergency remote teaching due to the pandemic, many developed guidelines and training tools for faculty teaching online. In one shared google document created by the Director of Faculty Development & Technology Innovation at DePaul University, a list of links was compiled with over 400 U.S. university resource pages faculty transitioning to online teaching [8]. Columbia University’s Center for Teaching and Learning was among the list as they created a comprehensive resource page of online resources and workshops to provide guidance on adapting courses to an online or blended format, teaching with technology, and pedagogical strategies for engaging students online [9]. While many universities created resource pages for faculty, some also created video training that they made available to faculty to support them in their transition to online teaching. University of Central Florida Division of Digital Learning created a series of workshops and training videos titled “Keep Teaching” for faculty transitioning to teaching online, as well as specific training on the use of Zoom and other online learning tools [10]. The Pennsylvania State University developed a task group of faculty, staff, and administrators who continue to develop specific guidelines for teaching remotely and in-person, including a series of webinars for faculty regarding technology, best practices, and assessments [11]. The Ohio State University compiled a similar list of tools and strategies to keep teaching and support student success, including a series of virtual...
workshops provided exclusively to their faculty members [12]. Louisiana State University created a webinar titled “Strategies for Remote Teaching” and provided a list of printables, videos, and step-by-step instructions to support their faculty in this process [13]. New York University created a website to outline the steps and tools that can be used to connect with students remotely and deliver course materials, including quick steps to start instructing remotely, best practices and guides, FAQs, and live video training sessions [14]. The University of Oxford and the University of Melbourne created centralized pages for their faculty with links to a variety of guides for online teaching created by experts in the field [15], [16]. The University of Windsor created a resource site with a collection of videos and podcasts from a variety of sources that overview the use of the online classroom, data implications for teaching online, and different online teaching tools [17]. The South China University of Technology established six online teaching and learning consulting groups for faculty and students [18]. The Qatar Foundation for Education partnered with universities such as Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar to provide a free online course aimed at training staff in remote teaching, and the Sharjah Private Education Authority (SPEA) set up the Sharjah Education Academy, an e-platform with online training sessions [19].

As these examples demonstrate, many universities provided training and supports for faculty transitioning to teaching online. The Columbia University School of Social Work’s webinar series added to these efforts, and was unique because the webinar sessions and resources were geared toward faculty anywhere in the world and shared freely.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE SERIES

A. Methods

This paper is a retrospective single case study of the webinar series [20], with data from the webinar series documents and participant feedback. The setting for the live webinar series was online from March 2020-April 2020, and data was reviewed after the webinar series concluded. The setting for the asynchronous use of recordings and resources is online and ongoing, and data for this paper was reviewed on November 18, 2020.

B. Series Goals

The goal of the webinar series and continued sharing of recordings and resources is to support educators anywhere transitioning to teaching online due to COVID-19. Educators are free to share the materials or use them for inspiration for customized faculty training. As the pandemic leads to budget cuts in higher education, we hope that this free resource will provide value to our colleagues around the world.

The topics selected were intended to support instructors new to engaging students online, address the traumatic context of the worldwide epidemic, and prepare instructors to teach in a context that has included a rise in anti-Asian hate crimes [21], [22], [23], and a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities [24], [25], [26].

The webinar series included the following sessions: (1) The basics of online student engagement and online instructor presence: Engaging students using instructor webcam, chat, polling, and breakout rooms; (2) Trauma-informed teaching & learning (TITL) online: The principles of TITL, practical ways to apply them online, and self-care for instructors and students; (3) Inclusive online teaching and teachable moments in online classrooms: Creating an inclusive classroom community online, responding to microaggressions online, and other teachable moments online; and (4) Panel of instructors who have experience teaching in both physical and online classrooms: Sharing advice and lessons learned.

C. Series Planning and Logistics

This was a fast-paced and high-impact project in response to the rapid move to online teaching that college and university educators had to make due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The project planning started in early March 2020, and the webinar series ran from March 23 - April 2, 2020, with the recordings and slides posted and shared on April 13. An open invitation to all educators anywhere to freely attend was issued via email, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, listservs, and word of mouth.

The webinars involved teamwork and creativity in getting them up running quickly. Once the School of Social Work’s Dean and senior leadership approved opening up the series to the world, the School’s Online Campus administration organized and developed the webinars, and webinar presenters included the Online Campus administration (Matthea Marquart, Johanna Creswell Báez, and Kristin Garay) along with the Columbia online instructors Dawn Shedrick, Beth Counselman Carpenter, Zuleka Henderson, Rob Hartley, Melanie Lowe Hoffman, and Eri Noguchi. Technical support was provided by Columbia Live Support Specialists Taylor Eutsey, Agata Dera, and Mary Downs, and the Online Campus administration, including Rebecca Y. Chung, provided additional support. The School’s Communications team supported inviting educators, posting the recordings, and sharing the links. The School’s IT team gave us access to their Zoom Webinar account. The University’s Libraries posted the slides and materials in the University’s Academic Commons. Colleagues throughout the School’s networks spread the word about the series and encouraged sign-ups; after the series ended, they shared the Google Doc with the many free resources.

The series was free, in order to be useful to the largest audience possible, and was offered twice. In order to accommodate a variety of schedules across time zones, the sessions were offered during lunchtime for the first week and during the evening for the second week, in East Coast time. In order to be helpful to the largest number of educators possible, the series was platform-agnostic, and was therefore offered in Adobe Connect during the first week and Zoom during the second week.

The webinars were designed to be interactive, with participants actively engaging in the chat and via polls. This built a sense of community among the participants who came together to consider how to best educate their students during this crisis. Colleagues who attended the full webinar series began to become acquainted and/or re-acquainted with one
another, and they generously shared helpful tips for online teaching.

After the series concluded, a Google Doc with the links to all of the recordings, slides, and handouts [27] was shared via email and social media, and the School published an article about the series [28].

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE SESSIONS

A. The Basics of Online Student Engagement and Online Instructor Presence

This session covered general principles for engaging students online, rather than teaching specific platform tools. Table 1 shows the agenda for this session. Like the other sessions in the series, this session was platform-agnostic, and participants who had questions about their institution’s tools were encouraged to reach out to their institution’s IT team. The session drew upon the Online Campus administration’s numerous past trainings for online instructors, and focused on engaging students in live, synchronous online class sessions. Topics covered included use of instructor webcam and microphone, slides and other classroom materials, student webcam and microphone, polls, and breakout groups. The session also included ways to engage students outside of live class sessions, including course announcements, email, phone, and feedback while grading.

B. Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning (TITL) Online

This session focused on trauma-informed teaching and learning (TITL) and how to apply these principles online. Table 2 shows the agenda for this session. The impact of trauma and the need for self-care was discussed, for both instructors and students. Expanding upon Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s trauma-informed approach [29], the following seven key TITL principles were discussed: (1) Physical, emotional, social, & academic respect, (2) trustworthiness & transparency, (3) support & connection, (4) collaboration & mutuality, (5) empowerment, voice, & choice, (6) cultural, historical, & gender contexts, and (7) resilience, growth, & change [30]. For example, teachers can support trustworthiness and transparency by creating consistent class structures that are clear and predictable, such as setting break times and starting with an agenda for each class. The webinar also provided time to consider how to bring these practices into grading, such as being flexible with assignment and deadlines (collaboration & mutuality), implementing realistic attendance policies (empowerment, voice & choice), and reminding each other that everyone is trying their best (resilience, growth & change). The session drew on a past 6-hour workshop the Online Campus administration had led on Power, Trauma, and Grading [31], and included an updated handout from that workshop, on TITL principles and practical ideas for using these practices in the online classroom [32]. Later, we published an op-ed about TITL principles for the coming academic year [33].

| TABLE I. WORKSHOP: THE BASICS |
|--------------------------------|
| **Workshop: The Basics of Online Student Engagement and Online Instructor Presence** |
| **Agenda** | **Materials** |
| Welcome, agenda, and introductions | The slides and recordings are freely available [34], [35] |
| Options for engaging students via instructor presence | |
| Options for engaging students using live class session tools | |
| Options for engaging students outside of live classes | |
| Wrap up, Q&A, and thank you | |

| TABLE II. WORKSHOP: TITL |
|--------------------------|
| **Workshop: Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning (TITL) Online** |
| **Agenda** | **Materials** |
| Welcome, agenda, and introductions | The slides and recordings are freely available [36], [37] |
| Resilience and Self-Care | |
| Trauma-informed approach and trauma-informed teaching and learning (TITL) | |
| Practical ways to use TITL online | |
| Wrap up, Q&A, and thank you | |

C. Inclusive Online Teaching and Teachable Moments in Online Classrooms

This session covered creating an inclusive classroom community online, responding to microaggressions online, and other teachable moments online. With different co-facilitators for weeks one and two, the agendas were slightly different for each week, but the sessions covered the same key content; they were based on past workshops the co-facilitators had led together [38], [39]. Tables 3 and 4 show the agendas for these sessions. Topics covered included risks students take when participating in class, reasons to create an inclusive learning community, ways to create a classroom community that supports students in taking risks, setting community agreements with students, building community throughout the semester, tools for addressing microaggressions, and examples from online courses.

D. Panel of Instructors

The panel of instructors shared advice and lessons learned from experienced online instructors who have taught both online and in the physical classroom. Table 5 shows the agenda for this session. Each instructor discussed their experience teaching online and provided advice to instructors who were taking their courses online quickly. The panel discussed what was surprising in teaching online for the first time and if instructors found anything in a physical classroom that can’t be done online. For instructors who were having to make the quick transition to teaching online for the first time, the panel provided ideas on what they would recommend to prioritize. Recommendations were made to keep it simple, provide time to make sure your tech is working, and to focus on connecting and engaging with students via questions, chat, and discussions.
Ultimately, we hope that the students taught by the educators who attended or reviewed our series have benefited and will continue to benefit from the instructors becoming more comfortable teaching and engaging with them online.

B. Positive Feedback From Webinar Participants

Feedback from participants via the chat and in follow-up emails was overwhelmingly positive; chat comments as participants logged out included “Thank you everyone for your warmth here! :)”, “Thank you for sharing these great approaches during these times! :)”, “Thank you so much! This has been incredibly helpful!” and “Signing off now, thank you SO much, a real service to the community!”

In addition to the positive written responses received from participants, the quantitative data collected through polls also demonstrates the engagement of those who attended the live sessions. In the first four sessions completed in Adobe Connect, there were a combined total of 1,716 chats among the participants, including questions about course content, responses to instructor demonstrations, and overall supportive community building.

During the first webinar we asked the same question at the start and end of the session: “What is your comfort level with engaging students online?” At the start of the session, 24.6% were very comfortable or comfortable, and by the end of the session, the results indicated that participants felt more confident with moving to teaching online, as the responses had changed to 61.7% very comfortable or comfortable. Fig. 1 shows these results.

At the end of both sessions of our second webinar, we asked instructors “What is your comfort level with using trauma-informed teaching and learning principles online?” and found that 77.6% stated they felt comfortable or very comfortable after completing the session.

V. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As experienced online educators, we created this webinar series in order to meet an immediate need to support our School’s on-campus faculty in newly transitioning to teaching online during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and as social workers, we opened the series up freely to support our fellow educators around the world during an immensely stressful time. We hope that sharing this experience as an example will continue to provide value to our colleagues in education.

IV. IMPACT

A. Wide Reach

With its blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning options, this series has benefited a large number of educators experiencing the quick transition to online remote teaching. These include CSSW’s instructors, the 776 instructors from 265 institutions around the world who registered for the webinars, and the many instructors who continue to access the recordings and materials. These recordings and materials will continue to be useful as instructors plan for continued remote teaching in the summer, fall, and potentially beyond. As of November 18, 2020, the recordings of the webinars have been viewed 4,977 times, and the slides have been viewed in Columbia’s Academic Commons 2,500 times.

We have been pleased to see that the series and recordings have been shared with other Schools within our University [43], and at other institutions, including Emory University [44], McMaster University [45], The University of Chicago [46], University of Maine at Presque Isle [47], University of Missouri-St. Louis [48], University of Southern Maine [49], Wheaton College [50], the Keep Teaching community network [51], and more. The series is listed as a resource on our School’s internal website with teaching resources [52], our School’s public Action Lab website [53], and on our University Library’s COVID-19 archives as part of their collection of responses to the pandemic [54].
Opening up this webinar series freely was a rewarding experience, and we recommend doing this when possible. Benefits include a wider reach for a team’s work, the ability to build community with educators across the globe, and cross-pollination of ideas. We also found that the training was relevant for K-12 educators who attended, and would recommend including them when opening up workshops for faculty in higher education.

We maximized the use of existing resources in creating and running this webinar series, which resulted in being able to run this at a minimal cost, and recommend using existing technology, drawing from existing workshops [51] and presentations, and inviting existing members of your institution’s extended team to contribute.

Finally, after offering webinars, we recommend sharing resources, such as slides, recordings, and one-page handouts to support implementing the ideas shared. This can greatly extend the reach of the webinar, beyond the original attendees.

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