Collaborating within a Lockdown: Students’ Online Collaboration to Develop a College Readiness Workshop during the COVID-19 in-person restrictions

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic created significant disruption within the educational setting, including the rapid shift to a fully online learning environment. Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore how graduate students collaborated synchronously and reimagined an in-person academic service learning project into an asynchronous workshop format. Methodology/Approach: An explanatory single case study approach was used to explore how educational leadership doctoral students developed content for and transitioned the modality of an academic service learning project—a college readiness workshop for middle school students—during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings/Conclusions: Overall, the development of and transition to a fully online workshop website format highlighted the importance and additional need for technology to support project content, the challenge of how to best incorporate audience engagement through an asynchronous platform, and the shift in roles and expectations of the graduate students throughout the workshop development process. Implications: Although this learning experience was adapted due to pandemic-related restrictions, this reimagined student-led project provided additional and unique opportunities for collaboration and technology integration that can be useful and applicable to the students’ post-lockdown lives.

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In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began its negative toll globally, impacting all facets of life, including the school environment. Starting in March 2020, both the K-12 setting as well as the higher education environment had to quickly shift from traditional in-person instruction to an online format. Students who once only knew how to experience academic support at a traditional brick-and-mortar setting were now required to learn and receive services through a remote environment (Quezada et al., 2020). Numerous challenges arose throughout the P-20 setting, creating frustration for educators and complicating students’ success within the classroom (Dorn et al., 2020; Herold, 2020).

In the spring 2020 semester, the same semester as the pandemic start, doctoral-level graduate students were asked to participate in an academic service learning project to develop a college readiness workshop for middle school students within their local community. What was once a project to be delivered as a one-day, in-person workshop at a local school now had to transition to a fully online website where the middle school student audience could access the material as an asynchronous learning experience. This decision was made to adhere to the current lockdown protocols and work-from-home restrictions, while still allowing doctoral students to continue to synchronously work with their peers on their academic serving learning project to produce an asynchronous college readiness website for middle school student use.

As in many P-20 classrooms around the world, students participating in the academic service learning project had to think creatively, pivot, and strategically plan due to the new restrictions placed on peer collaboration and in-person interaction with others. The quick, and perhaps haphazard, upheaval to a provisional online learning format oftentimes disrupted the routine and structure students relied on (Gardner, 2020). Limited access to devices, poor bandwidth, and even a lack of WiFi were also challenges for students to participate in and successfully complete their coursework (McMurtrie, 2020). Quickly moving to remote learning disrupted all student levels, including graduate students attempting to construct a college readiness workshop for middle school students within the local community. As such, guided by research (e.g., Henry et al., 2020), it was important to modify the group assignment to allow the students to still engage with their peers and develop a fully online workshop while adhering to the lockdown restrictions during the spring 2020 peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study was to explore how graduate students collaborated synchronously and reimagined an in-person academic service learning project into an asynchronous online learning experience for middle school students within their local community.
Establishing Roles for a Collaborative Learning Environment within the Online Setting

In the transition from in-person to online course delivery, the graduate students were now also required to adapt an in-person college readiness workshop to an asynchronous workshop format for middle school students. This transition created the immediate need for the doctoral students to virtually connect and synchronously collaborate with their peers to develop an asynchronous college readiness website for middle school students. As noted by Dumford and Miller (2018), students enrolled in online courses often reported to have limited opportunities for collaborative learning and lessened quality interactions with both their peers and instructors. However, when there is mindful use of online collaborative learning, students perceive the importance and benefit of virtual engagement within the online classroom (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Hernández-Sellés et al., 2019).

For the graduate students to successfully adapt their materials for the reimagined virtual student college readiness workshop website, it was essential to engage each other through the online learning environment through synchronous teleconference options and shared online resources. Utilization of online, teleconferencing, and cloud collaboration tools “provide students with the opportunity to develop collaboration skills” (Schrameyer et al., 2016, p. 546). With the course-related need and overall learning benefit for online student collaboration, it was also important for the students to integrate online collaboration tools that students were well acquainted with using (Curseu & Pluut, 2013; Weinberger et al., 2007).

Group Work Engagement and Peer Collaboration

Peer learning and collaboration can serve as an effective learning strategy within the higher education environment and can be used by students both informally and formally to engage within their coursework and develop skills (Boud & Cohen, 2014). Group work can be a motivating learning strategy and also promote students’ reasoning ability and overall achievement (Michaelsen et al., 2014). Instructors who integrate course assignments utilizing group work can include strategies like role assignments and peer ratings (Zhang & Ohland, 2009) to ensure project structure and increase student buy-in. There are long term benefits for students to participate in diverse group settings and engage in formal collaborative tasks as these skills can transfer into a professional work setting (Takeda & Homberg, 2014).

Despite the positive aspects of peer collaboration within course assignments, students may negatively perceive group work and formal peer engagement activities (Chang & Brickman, 2018). Scotland (2016) found that postsecondary students believed that assessed group work was an important element within their coursework; however, their perceptions of formal peer collaboration is “liable to change depending on what is experienced” (p. 15). Research frequently notes that peer collaboration can be complicated when all members do not equally contribute to the assigned task (Le et al., 2018; Li & Campbell, 2008). Additionally, an instructor’s assessment of
the group’s work may not necessarily be an accurate indicator of specific students’ performance and contribution to the group work (Plastow et al., 2010).

Increased Technology Use in Course Collaboration and Project Development

In pivoting from an in-person to a fully online learning environment, the graduate students were required to incorporate best practices in technology use not only for their participation in their now fully remote course setting, but also in the development of an academic service learning assignment—a college readiness workshop designed for local middle school students. As noted by Hillmayr et al. (2020), the incorporation of technology use can heighten and enrich the learning experience for students. As the graduate students needed to construct a college readiness workshop where information was fully online, it was important for the graduate students to work together and create content delivery that was accessible to individuals with varying comfort levels with technology (Talcott et al., 2013; Tang, 2016). In addition to integrating technology to best support the intended audience of the students’ academic service learning project, it was important to integrate various tech tools to maximize the student engagement, collaboration, and learning in course collaboration and project development (Belland et al., 2017; Higgins et al., 2019; Moreno, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This learning theory stresses the importance of knowledge development through active participation in a unique learning experience (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1999). When students were required to shift to a fully online course setting, the academic service learning project—the development of a college readiness program for local middle school students—also had to be reimagined as a fully online entity. The shift to online coursework and virtual peer collaboration provided the opportunity for the doctoral students to work with each other synchronously in a new, unique structure and engage within the online setting as they were developing content for the online college readiness “workshop”—an asynchronous college readiness website with resources and pre-recorded videos for middle school students to access and review (Stein, 1998). Through the graduate students’ collaboration and commitment to the success of the academic service learning project, a community of practice—a group “who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”—was formed (Wenger, 2011, p. 1).

As noted by Catalano (2015), situated learning experiences enable “learners to experience a concept within the circumstance in which it would most likely be useful, and is presumed to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from the instructional situation to its application to environments outside the classroom” (p. 653). Due to the pandemic lockdown, students were no longer able to collaborate in an in-person course environment; instead, students had to engage with their peers remotely, but synchronously, to continue work on their academic service learning project. While this
may have presented an initial challenge, this situated learning experience allowed student learning to improve as group engagement developed within the online setting (Altomonte et al., 2016).

As it relates to this study, how graduate students had to shift their collaboration and the development of an academic service learning project to a fully online learning experience due to the COVID-19 spring 2020 lockdown, this theoretical framework emphasizes that learning occurs within social situations and that the specific environment and level of group engagement provides the opportunity for effective learning to take place. While the online environment was a new setting for students to not only complete coursework, but collaborate for a group academic service learning project, this reimagined course experience provided a unique situation for student collaboration.

**Methods**

The purpose of this study was to explore how graduate students synchronously collaborated and reimagined an in-person academic service learning project into an asynchronous online learning experience. As such, the research questions guiding this study include the following:

1. How did graduate students navigate peer collaboration and project development in the shift from an in-person to online academic service learning experience impacted by the COVID-19 spring 2020 lockdown?
2. What was the role of technology in the collaboration and overall engagement of an online academic service learning experience impacted by the COVID-19 spring 2020 lockdown?

**Study Design**

This study utilized an explanatory single case study approach, allowing to chronicle the experiences and behavior of individuals within a particular real-life setting (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2017). The case study approach was identified as appropriate as it provided the structure to obtain an in-depth exploration of a particular phenomenon, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context were not apparently observable (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2017). Specifically, an explanatory approach was applied as it supported the examination of the doctoral student experiences during the transition to and preparation of an asynchronous online college readiness workshop website during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Lotzkar & Bottorff, 2001). Within case study research, it is important to identify the boundedness of the specific unit of analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 2006).

**Setting & Participants**

For this single case study, the unit of analysis is defined as the doctoral-level educational leadership course. This project occurred over the span of the spring 2020
semester. Additionally, the project was situated within a graduate-level course in an educational leadership doctoral program where students collaborated on a college readiness workshop for middle school students within the local community. Due to the pandemic, the setting of the college classroom transitioned from an in-person to remote setting, adhering to the work-from-home orders placed on the large urban, Mid-Atlantic private institution, beginning in March 2020. The focus of the course was on advising, recruitment, and retention of students transitioning into and within the postsecondary environment. The course learning outcomes included the following: to identify and describe historical and current issues impacting recruitment, retention, and advising of students within the postsecondary environment; to assess the effectiveness of high impact practices utilized in higher education to improve retention and student success; evaluate various advising and related student service models; and to utilize recruitment and student success best practices to promote higher education access and entry for potential postsecondary students. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course was exclusively offered as an in-person graduate course, meeting weekly. Following the shift to the pandemic lockdown restrictions, the course transitioned to a synchronous online course, meeting weekly at the previously scheduled time.

This college readiness workshop was a required academic service learning assignment for the course. As noted in the course syllabus, the academic service learning assignment was described as such:

For this project, we will create a postsecondary readiness workshop for middle school/high school students within the local area. We must remember that concepts related to recruitment, retention, and advisement are not just important for/occur solely in the campus setting. Introducing students early on to the importance and structure of higher education is vital for their persistence and success. For the project, I am asking for the following: video presentations; student handouts; relevant assessments. You are required to incorporate applicable readings, research, and best practices to make this project come alive! Please note that I trust in your creativity. If you think an additional item/concept would be useful: go for it.

Noted by Stake (2006), activities and the overall function of the identified case will be influenced by the context surrounding the associated case. Although this course was originally scheduled within an in-person class environment, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course transitioned to a synchronous course format halfway through the semester. The course met weekly, on Tuesdays, and took place in the evening for approximately 2 h. Following the transition to the online format, the instructor utilized Google Meets to connect with the students for the scheduled class sessions. Due to the pandemic-related restrictions, it was decided for doctoral students to collaborate synchronously to develop an asynchronous college readiness workshop website for middle school student review.

This study used purposeful sampling, allowing the researcher to access participants that best served for investigating the noted study purpose (Creswell, 2013). Sampling
occurred within a doctoral-level educational leadership course. In total, sixteen doctoral students were enrolled in and actively participated in the development of their assigned academic service learning project. Graduate students enrolled in the course were all full-time postsecondary administrators.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data sources for this research project consisted of open-ended survey questions, observations, and course artifacts. Prior to data collection, permission was granted from the researcher’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). All data were collected in the spring 2020 semester, specifically from March to May 2020. A qualitative approach was identified as most appropriate for this topic as this study attempted to understand how individuals perceive and construct the meaning of their experiences related to the development of an online workshop format (Merriam, 2002). Noted by Yin (2017), the use of multiple data sources allowed for triangulation, with convergent evidence increasing the construct validity of the qualitative project structure.

**Data Sources**

**Open-ended survey questions.** One of the key data sources came from the use of open-ended survey questions. The survey was shared with graduate students electronically, where they had the opportunity to respond at a time and date most convenient for their schedules. The survey included seven open-ended questions, ranging from their perceptions of the experience (including the assignment components and the transition of in-person to virtual workshop formats) to their identified roles within the construction of the project. Examples of the open-ended survey questions include: (1) “What was your overall experience in the planning of the academic service learning postsecondary readiness workshop website?;” (2) “Were there any challenges in transitioning the workshop content from an in-person format to online format? If so, please describe.;” (3) “Please provide your experience and overall perceptions related to the increased use of technology for this academic service learning project.” The reason why open-ended survey questions were used instead of real-time interviews and/or focus groups were due to the scheduling challenges during the first peak of the pandemic. Student participants indicated obstacles in balancing the new work-from-home orders that were oftentimes complicated by personal/family obligations and time commitments. As it is vital to not only build rapport, but also create a comfort level in study participation (Gruber et al., 2008; Salmons, 2014), the use of open-ended survey questions was most realistic.

**Observations.** Observations were also conducted during students’ in-class peer collaboration sessions, allowing the researcher to monitor the reactions and interactions of the graduate students during scheduled peer collaboration sessions to prepare the academic service learning project deliverables. Throughout the observations, the researcher constructed detailed memos for subsequent review and analysis (Stake, 1995).
Course artifacts. A third data source included the collection of course documents, evaluations, and student artifacts. The collection of the documents provided key information about the course structure, assignments, and expectations, as well as the completed student deliverables. The collected documents supported the process of triangulation as it allowed for the verification of authenticity of the findings from the other noted data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Miles et al., 2019).

Coding and Analysis Procedures

After the data was collected and organized, this project utilized a multi-step coding procedure. Additionally, throughout the data collection process, the researcher made use of analytic memos to document and organize thoughts on emerging data (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher first engaged in the open coding process to identify and document initial perceptions of the collected data (Bazeley, 2013). Following the open coding process, the project engaged in a first-level coding process, specifically through the use of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016). Pattern coding was used through the second-level coding phase. Qualitative analysis occurred using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Dedoose. For the analysis phase, adhering to best practices for case study research, this project employed direct interpretation, as well as categorical aggregation (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Stake, 1995).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was guided by Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) guidelines. Specifically, credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability were all considered in the study design, including the purposeful use of various data sources targeting the experiences of and work by the graduate students collaborating in the development of the online college readiness workshop. To ensure confirmability, I continuously acknowledged my role, not only as researcher, but as course instructor. Throughout the project, it was essential that my reflections on the project were collected and I remained incredibly conscious of the importance to reduce researcher bias throughout the process. Additionally, by thoughtfully connecting this project to the literature and constructing detailed and meaningful decisions to the study’s design ensured the project’s dependability. Also, although student collaboration related to adapting workshop materials from in-person to online formats will not always be specific to a pandemic, there is transferability as online formats may be more preferred due to accessibility and cost.

Findings

The year 2020, and the significant influence the COVID-19 pandemic had on the classroom environment, served as a pivotal time to reimagine instructional formats and academic information delivery for all students within the P-20 system. Specific to this project, graduate students had to collaborate and reimagine the delivery of a college
readiness workshop due to the in-person restrictions brought on by the pandemic. Although the pandemic initially complicated the graduate students’ planning efforts, by the end of the collaborative learning experience, as one of the doctoral students noted, the group found that “creating the website was better than the content we would have developed for the in-person experience.” While the pandemic forced students to engage in more virtual experiential educational experiences, the pandemic provided the opportunity to create virtual experiential learning experiences that would have been typically structured as in-person events. Though these shifts were a requirement of the work-from-home restrictions, it allowed educators to reimagine what experiential learning could look like in the new educational environment.

Overall, as evidenced by the course observations, the student collaboration to develop an asynchronous workshop website highlighted the importance and additional need for technology to support project content, the challenge to work together to incorporate audience engagement through an asynchronous platform, and the shift in roles and expectations of the graduate students throughout the workshop development process. Throughout the experience, the graduate students were tasked with incorporating content that would best serve the middle school student audience in their college readiness development. As one student put it, a female doctoral student in her mid-thirties who also was a full-time college administrator noted that the virtual collaboration and use of an online platform allowed “the information to live beyond the classroom … and affords us an opportunity to ‘meet the students where they are at’ and provide information in a way that they are familiar with—online.”

Maximizing Technology Use

Although the graduate students planned to incorporate technology into the originally-planned in-person college readiness workshop through the creation and use of presentations, the online collaboration increased technology use when the workshop shifted into a fully online experience. Throughout the planning process, the graduate students were observed feeling apprehensive to not only learn about, but successfully incorporate, new tech tools to better engage the middle school student audience participating in the college readiness project. Students displayed potential uneasiness because of the need to increase their comfort in technology use. For a female doctoral student who works as a full-time higher education administrator at a local community college, she noted “it did raise my level of frustration and anxiety and it lost its joy because it became another added task during an already trying time. But the output was worth the frustration.”

As documented in the student evaluations of the project, some students were initially frustrated with increasing their technology skills for the project; however, through online peer collaboration, the graduate student group engaged in ongoing conversations and meetings to maximize technology integration for the project. For a male doctoral student who works as a full-time higher education administrator at an urban community college, “moving the postsecondary readiness workshop to online helps it stay as an accessible resource. An in-person workshop relies on the individual to retain the information. The website allows any users with the link 24/7 access.”
Another student, a female higher education administrator reflected following her participation in the development of the college readiness workshop website:

I appreciated the increased use of technology, but that is probably because I enjoy the creativity and innovation that online platforms afford us. It forced me to improve my technology skills, especially in the way of website development. I have never used Google Site and doing so for this class opened me up to new tools that I will utilize in my new position.

By the end of the project development process, the graduate students incorporated various components of Google Workplace, including housing their college readiness workshop website through Google Sites and embedding participant evaluations with Google Forms. The graduate students included technology applications including developing informational cartoons via PowToon, infographics via Canva, and applicable content via YouTube videos. Additionally, the graduate students integrated interactive pictures, video clips, and hyperlinks to applicable state and federal college readiness websites. As a whole, students had the opportunity to not only further their technology skills for their own academic and professional development, but also increase the level of technology included within the college readiness workshop website to maximize audience website interaction.

Collaborating to Identify Challenges Associated with Workshop Audience Engagement

Throughout the workshop development process, the students were observed engaging in rich discussions around audience engagement. Initially, the graduate students anticipated in-person activities like icebreakers and breakout sessions to ensure middle school students would feel engaged through small activities that promote interaction between the audience and presenters. However, once the workshop had to shift to the asynchronous online format, the graduate students were more critical and conscious about how to still ensure an engaging learning environment for the middle school student audience. That said, the graduate students still felt that the online format did not fully allow for an engaging workshop environment with one graduate student sharing, “I think there could have been more in the way of student engagement and that is probably the most difficult piece to transition from in-person to online.” Additionally, one graduate student who also served as a full-time faculty member at a local community college was candid that constructing a creative and engaging online workshop space was not only difficult due to the transition from an in-person format, but also because of the challenges and stress experienced during the pandemic. As the student reflected, the development of engagement was complicated by the various stressors initiated by the early weeks of the pandemic:

I think I struggled a bit at first with expressing my concerns about how to “connect” interpersonally online. I also think that managing crises my students were dealing with … and
my own stress responses to the pandemic ... were personal factors that played a role. Sometimes I felt less focused, productive, or confident. At times, it felt difficult to be as creative as I normally feel. I think understanding that these were normal, if disruptive responses to the conditions at hand helped me take a breath and revisit with more patience for myself and others.

As evidenced in the project artifacts, one way the graduate student group allowed for a continued sense of audience engagement was the workshop website’s accessibility. Specifically, the graduate students were conscious of including material that the middle school students could revisit at a later date. Although the in-person workshop format would have allowed for a more interactive experience, the in-person format would only have allowed for a one day experience, limited only to the middle school students available for the scheduled event. Instead, the online workshop website now became accessible to all students (and their parents) with access to the website URL. For one graduate student who also serves as an associate director for a local postsecondary student success program, she reflected:

I always love the in-person effect. Looking into the eyes of students and reaching them in the moment is a powerful experience but the use of the online platform allows the scope of the project to broaden exponentially. Now, we have a living, documented “experience” to which students may return time and again.

Overall, although the students had to rethink how to engage the workshop audience, they participated in rich conversations to expand their own interpretation of student engagement, as well as develop new opportunities for audience engagement on a long term basis.

Varying Roles and Challenges of Peer Collaboration

With the transition from an in-person to online workshop format, students also had to rethink their contributions and how they would collaborate in the development of the workshop website. When the graduate students initially were planning for the one-day, in-person workshop, they engaged in an in-class activity to assign what aspects of the project they would be responsible for. Based on their preference, students were observed identifying tasks that could be completed individually or as a group. As this was a student-driven academic service learning project, the instructor allowed students to determine the specific roles and collaborations for the construction of the work. One student shared, “the assignment came across vague when it was switched to an online format ... and some really did not want to be bogged down completing it during our downtime. However, we did the best we could based on our energy.” Another graduate student noted, “it was challenging in the beginning but as we broke it down into assigned tasks, it was more effective.” With the transition to a fully online workshop website, some students seamlessly transitioned, whereas
others had trouble reimagining their role, and work, in the new format. One graduate student shared,

I took a large role in the design for the entire website with creating additional content and assisting my colleagues with all of their material and consent areas …. There were some colleagues who excelled at contributing material and others who were very confused as to what their role should be.

Students were also often observed having challenges with peer collaboration that supported their assigned work, as some students contributed more than others. Although this may be a component of any group work, it appears that the pandemic exacerbated some students’ ability to concentrate and fully collaborate with others. For a graduate student who also serves as a full-time financial aid administrator, he noted “I think that we had a great amount of time, but too much of the work was done at the last minute in regards to actually putting up the website …. There were lop-sided contributions by individuals to the project.” Although challenges with project roles and ability to adapt to the new format were noted, the graduate students were observed completing the project by the intended due date and engaging with each other to get the deliverables to the middle school student audience.

**Discussion**

Over the course of the spring 2020 semester, educational environments worldwide were required to adjust to work-from-home orders and remote instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For the doctoral students, transitioning an in-person college readiness workshop to a reimagined asynchronous workshop website created additional complications in the preparation and execution of the required academic service learning project. Through a case study approach, this paper examined the remote, yet synchronous, collaboration of graduate students during this project experience. As noted in the findings, although the students were trepidatious of this transition, they ultimately worked as a team to create a fully online academic service learning project that was accessible and integrated with various forms of technology—including many applications and platforms that were learned throughout the development process. However, students perceived challenges, and at times, frustration when adapting to the new format, and realigning their contributions and collaborations throughout the construction of the workshop. With the data gathered from the surveys, observations, and course artifacts, it appears that the complications and, perhaps confusion, brought on by the pandemic could be seen through the emotions felt throughout the academic service learning project.

Beyond the increased use of technology, reimagined asynchronous middle school student audience engagement, and various forms of synchronous graduate student collaboration, this project also allowed the graduate students to engage as a group and apply higher education-based content for a larger audience to support community needs. Specifically, this project required the graduate students to rethink their own
knowledge of the online learning space and how to collaborate to develop materials for the online audience. As one student put it, the course content could now have “real world placement for a meaningful project.” Additionally, another graduate student noted, “I had to think about the perspective of our target audience and what challenges they may face.” Related to the study’s framework, situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the students had to make the best of their new learning experience and participate in a new and unique learning experience. The need to collaborate with peers exclusively through the remote setting provided the opportunity for students to work with each other in a reimagined learning environment. Through the students’ collaboration and commitment to the success of the academic service learning project, a community of practice was formed (Wenger, 2011).

**Implications for Future Research and Practice**

While the use of online learning and blending of different modalities have been utilized within higher education for some time, specific experiences of shifting modalities and increasing technology use during the COVID-19 pandemic provide a unique snapshot for future exploration and application. During the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors and students—regardless of their preferences in participating in online education—were forced to rapidly pivot any in-person instructional and experiential learning opportunities into a fully online modality. This rapid shift provided unique insight into instructor decisions and student experiences. With the increased online use, it provided more students the direct experience to engage in new learning modalities. These new experiences created the potential foundation for future blending of learning modalities to best support student needs, instead of just responding to lockdown restrictions. As such, graduate students can now better participate in and utilize various modalities in their coursework, as well as in their professional lives. Additionally, future research related to this work can occur as it relates to reimagining post-pandemic graduate student experiential project modalities, as well as gaining additional insight from the perspectives of audience members (middle school students) and their preference of asynchronous workshop website use.

**Limitations**

The current study included several limitations to note. Although this study contained several data sources, it would have been preferred to also incorporate interviews and/or focus groups to further explore the student experiences within the transition to an online workshop. Additionally, while project and course evaluation data was included, it would have been useful to also include peer evaluations. This project was bound to one graduate-level classroom during one semester, making the sample size and time frame of data collection incredibly small. Moreover, as this project focused on the student experience during COVID-19, their experiences were most likely heavily influenced by the pandemic and related factors. As a whole, the experiences noted by the included graduate student participants cannot be generalized to a
larger student population as this project captures a small group of students working together in an incredibly unique period of time.

**Conclusion**

Despite the workshop format transition occurring due to external factors, the application of this project has important implications in a post-COVID educational setting. Specifically, findings highlight how graduate students can utilize cloud-based collaboration applications to work together within a fully remote academic setting. Moreover, this experience forced students to expand their knowledge and application of new tech-based tools to incorporate into the new workshop format. The outcome of this tech-driven online workshop also allowed for the middle school student audience to increase access to the college readiness information and engage with the information through a new learning environment. Instead of a one-day in-person workshop, the graduate students collaborated to construct a website rich with interactive activities, information, and audience evaluation. Moreover, the students’ decision to utilize an asynchronous website format provided the audience of the academic service learning project the opportunity to access information at a later date. As previously noted, reimagining graduate-level experiential learning opportunities by blending in-person and synchronous and asynchronous online modalities allows for flexibility in how students can collaborate, contribute, and participate, thus optimizing the overall learning experience (Penrod, 2022). Overall, this project served as a unique learning experience for graduate students to collaborate, expand their technology skills, and apply their knowledge of the higher education environment through a one-of-a-kind online learning space for middle school students within the local community. Although this learning experience was adapted due to pandemic-related restrictions, this reimagined student-led project provided additional and unique opportunities for collaboration and technology integration that can be useful and applicable to the students’ post-lockdown lives.

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