Reimagining higher education during and post-COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities

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Abstract
The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has required faculty and students to adapt to an unprecedented challenge and rapidly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to distance learning formats through virtual classrooms. While most campuses trained faculty to ensure quality and maintenance of the curriculum through virtual classrooms, less consideration has been given to training students, who face equal challenges in adapting to this abrupt change in the delivery of the curriculum. Few approaches have been developed for students to facilitate their involuntary transition to virtual classrooms and maintenance of appropriate online learning behaviours and etiquette. Presented here are a series of propositions to help to maintain and
enhance the quality of college student engagement and activity in the virtual classroom. These guidelines are from one example of the State University of New York public educational system perspective, at the pandemic’s epicentre, while serving a diverse student population. Initiating a meaningful dialogue between faculty, who are engaged in efforts to cope and adapt to the pandemic, may prove useful in re-envisioning and re-designing future curriculum. This may facilitate future discussions on creating best practices guidelines for asynchronous/synchronous virtual classrooms post the pandemic. The present rapid communication suggests a framework for faculty to develop such guidelines to address the current gap in the literature.

**Keywords**
Virtual classrooms, online etiquette, professional behaviours, college students, distance learning, COVID-19

How can faculty teach undergraduate students through virtual classrooms during a pandemic that is exacerbating inequality issues? How can students truly participate in a virtual classroom if they do not have computers, reliable wireless connectivity, quiet spaces and free time away from taking care of family members? The COVID-19 pandemic has required faculty and students globally to respond to an unprecedented challenge: to transition rapidly at mid-semester from their traditional face-to-face curriculum to distance learning formats through virtual classrooms. Superficially, it would appear that the immediate need is to adapt formal educational practices to deal with the issues (i.e. smooth continuation of curriculum delivery and timely degree completion) under the draconian constraints imposed by the pandemic. However, the real challenge is far deeper and more intrinsic. The real issue is: how should faculty approach maintaining rigour and delivering quality education as well as support their students’ ongoing ability to engage in meaningful, interactive educational activities in the context of a crisis such as this pandemic?

Not surprisingly, faculty are currently observing all too familiar patterns of student academic behaviours that in many ways parallel those that New Yorkers and, less acutely, the rest of the Americans, have observed during recent past crises such as the 9/11 terrorist attack to the World Trade Center in 2001 and more recently, the devastating hurricane Super Storm Sandy of 2012 that cost New York State $65 billion dollars in damages due to a natural disaster, the second costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – National Centers for Environmental Information, 2020). In those past crises, such student behaviours were predictive of diminished learning outcomes. However, it is essential to note, that all of us, faculty and students alike, made our various adaptations in the *aftermath* of the crises which were bounded during and following these time-periods. In the case of 9/11, as
catastrophic as it was, the actual event happened over a period of a few hours but impacted the New Yorkers for a decade thereafter. In contrast, Super Storm Sandy came and went within a few days, but left unprecedented devastation in its wake, lasting nearly three years thereafter. All of us, faculty and students alike, saw what we did in the educational context as adapting to a dire situation during both these substantial crises. We all felt an inherent certainty that at some point, there would be a return to normal. During those particular time-periods, we all saw our adaptations as temporary. However, neither 9/11 nor Super Storm Sandy resulted in a complete suspension of face-to-face instruction, indefinitely. This current pandemic is still evolving, and as things continue to change, the one certainty among all the uncertainties is that it will not be a return to normal, but rather that it will be a new normal, which will be quite different from anything that we have known before. Therefore, we need to adapt our frame for change-making accordingly. The mode that faculty should be in is not resumption, but rather re-envisioning and re-imagining the design and delivery of the curriculum during these unprecedented times. The goal of this rapid communication opinion article is to inform both faculty and students of the emerging, creative and adaptive ways in which they may be able to meet professionally and collaboratively in enhancing the etiquette of online distance learning.

“The times they are a-changin’”

The lives of many students have been upended in this time of turmoil and uncertainty brought on by the pandemic. Many students are now living at home or with family members and they are being required to maintain their academic work under radically different circumstances and demands than prior to the cancellation of face-to-face instruction in colleges. Despite these challenges, for many students, the college classroom and its associated activities has become the one recognisable environment in their dramatically changed lives. The college classroom during the pandemic is an evolving constant! Moreover, this connection for students to their classroom is their sole anchor to normalcy, and for many it is their only place to reach out to people outside of their immediate family. Many faculty are being sought out by students to discuss the life circumstances and challenges that they are facing, while both the faculty member and the student are simultaneously trying to accomplish their educational goals. Equally, many faculty may be going through challenges similar to students but may not have the same ability to seek out someone to discuss their own issues. Although this conversion to online teaching and learning may seem like a temporary adjustment necessitated by the circumstance of the pandemic, and both students and faculty are likely to forecast that things will return to normal at some point, we propose that the exigency of the pandemic provides a critical and unique learning opportunity for both faculty and students. For many, if not most, faculty and students, this conversion was
unsought and therefore unplanned. In many cases, both groups were unwilling participants in this abrupt transition from face-to-face settings to virtual classrooms. The current virtual classroom has become the inevitable educational meeting grounds, whereby faculty and students must figure out, in real-time, how to make the best of an unprecedented situation. It is our opinion that these virtual classroom formats provide a unique opportunity for faculty to re-envision and re-imagine their teaching and for our students to acquire some very important educational and professional skills they may hitherto have not considered.

Providing a quality education during a crisis, in fact a pandemic, can be seen as a tool for building resilience by providing a sense of normalcy and purpose to both students and faculty in sensitive and meaningful ways. This demand for normalcy and security is an implicit student need that many faculty have already experienced in their virtual classrooms. In addition, faculty are tasked with developing strategies and approaches to meet these needs through the virtual classroom. It is fairly certain that while working from home was instituted as a response to the pandemic, an increasing number of employment settings have and will continue to become remote settings. Therefore, strategies to train students in proper etiquette and professional behaviours, while in the online virtual classroom, are skills that will be both valuable and transferable in future employment settings. Moreover, other skills required for effective learning inside the virtual space are also transferable to prospective employment settings.

The demand for faculty to promptly alter and/or entirely transform, and resume the curricular instruction in response to the social and physical distancing measures was complicated by a number of critical psychosocial factors that both faculty and students faced (e.g. loss of employment, housing, unexpected care-taking demands, etc.), all of which we will address in the following sections. All of these critical psychosocial factors warrant the utmost consideration prior to faculty and students being able to refocus their attention back to the redesigned and revised curriculum in the context of distance learning. While the challenges our students face may not be shared to the same extent by all college/university communities around the United States and globally, most of these challenges are shared concerns for almost all students and faculty in the face of crises such as this pandemic. Adapting within the New York epicentre and learning from our own instructional decisions during the evolving COVID-19 pandemic, we felt that our experiences and perspectives would transfer across other colleges/universities, nationally and internationally, who are adapting to the same challenges, but in varying degrees.

**Situating our work: Diversities and inequitable distribution of resources**

As background, our institution, The State University of New York College at Old Westbury (SUNY-OW), is a primarily undergraduate institution with an
enrolment of approximately 5152 students from the State of New York, about half of whom are from the metropolitan New York City area (50.45%) and the balance are from two neighbouring counties. Two-thirds, 65.59%, of our students are ethnic and racial minorities (28.14% Black; 24.13% Hispanic-American; 11.96% Asian-American and 1.13% Native-American or Pacific Islander) and 34.41% are white. Our gender distribution is fairly typical, 59.78% women and 40.22% male. Eighty-five per cent of our students receive some form of financial aid and 5.6% of our students (under New York State parameters) are educationally and economically disadvantaged students enrolled in our Educational Opportunity Program. Our campus is primarily (83.5%) non-residential. Prior to our campus closure, 16.42% of students resided on campus. The majority of our students, 83.64%, are full-time and 15.08% are part-time.

Social justice is the cornerstone of our College’s mission, and therefore our faculty consistently work on efficiently engaging with many forms of diversity. A significant majority of our students are first-generation college (FGC) and first-generation immigrant (FGI) students, who have very different needs than their traditional college student peers (for a review, see Mukherji et al., 2017). Moreover, SUNY-OW has been recognised in 2018 by USA Today and the College Factual Best College rankings among the top 5% of colleges and universities nationwide for the diversity of its student body and by the U.S. News & World Report ranked second among the Regional Universities in the North for the diversity of its student body. Our Institution, arguably, reflects the diversity of its neighbouring communities.

There are multiple critical psychosocial issues that our students, like many others across the nation, are facing. Issues such as whether faculty or students or their family members have or had contracted COVID-19, be they asymptomatic, symptomatic or hospitalised; whether students or their family members are or were able to remain employed; have the ability to sustain their essential needs for food, shelter, medicine, etc.; have additional responsibilities to care for loved ones (i.e. children, elder and other relatives). All of the above also have direct impact upon the ability of students (and faculty, in some cases) to have regular access to quiet, private spaces available for extended periods of time, to conduct and participate in ongoing academic work.

A non-trivial additional factor is also the access to computers/laptops and stable access to the internet. While this may seem unlikely in this digital age, we have found that many students, for a variety of reasons, only have cellular phones and either do not have, or share access to, a digital device other than a cellular phone. In order to alleviate these technology insecurity issues, certain colleges such as our own, have reactively devised systematic student outreach efforts during this pandemic and have provided them with loaner laptops at no cost, as needed. Many students do not have stable access to the internet with sufficient bandwidth to accommodate multiple users, since in a majority of cases there are several people, all working from home, and concurrently needing access to the internet.
Even when students are technology-secure, they face significant challenges in maintaining their normal class days and times given the new demands that the pandemic has placed upon them. Some of the challenges students face and have expressed are as follows: at home child/parent care, teaching their children their school work full-time while managing other responsibilities, abrupt changes or alterations in work schedules, uncertainty in employment, and in some cases, loss of employment, either their own or a family member’s upon whom the students depended for financial support. One example of an extreme situation reported by a small, but not insignificant number of our students is that they were made homeless by the closure of the dorms, and are for indefinite periods of time, living with relatives or friends. This parallels the situation of our international students residing in the dorms. Because of international travel restrictions, they could not return home. The situation was further complicated by the fact that our particular campus was in the process of being converted into a field hospital for COVID-19 patients, which seriously restricted students from accessing resources on or off campus.

**Navigating (the imposed) distance learning environments**

Educators – as *second-line responders* – are in the under-recognised and unanticipated position of having to mediate this multitude of student needs, which is further complicated by the indefinacy of an evolving situation. The immediacy of these needs has prompted faculty to have proactive discussions with students during spring break (mid-March, 2020) to survey whether or not faculty would be able to continue to hold distance learning virtual classes at the same days and times as they did in their traditional face-to-face classes prior to the pandemic. In most cases, the majority of students elected to continue these synchronous live virtual lectures and a minority of them elected to have asynchronous recorded lectures to view course materials when able. There are no systematically collected comprehensive data on the profile of students who attended synchronous classes more regularly (i.e. this may be due to some student factors such as part-time/full-time status, having to care for children, having to help their children as an ‘adjunct teacher’, and caring for an older family member regardless of typical family/cultural gender roles). However, what we observed through our own and our colleagues’ experiences was a very high attendance rate among all students who did not work full-time and qualified as ‘essential workers’ (e.g. students working at grocery stores, hospitals, nursing homes, etc.). As was evident throughout the video sessions, having to share a living space with other family members and pets, as well as taking care of small children, did not seem to deter students from joining classes, despite the above-mentioned distractions.

As we alluded to earlier, during the first few virtual class sessions, we observed that some students were not conducting themselves in the manner that would be expected in the typical face-to-face classroom setting. The students often seemed as if they were mentally elsewhere; they were not as engaged, as compared to
traditional face-to-face classes; they were not asking questions, and did not respond to direct questioning about issues or needs with faculty as would have been past practice. While this is understandable given the pandemic, the lack of these types of behaviours does not benefit students in the long term.

These inattentive behaviours appear to be predominating in many of our classes. Many of our peers are struggling with visual attendance and engagement related issues, as well as the lack of virtual class etiquette. Many of us are also trying to find the boundary conditions for compassion, while still ensuring compliance with course requirements. Again, these issues are typically built into the planning and execution of online or hybrid courses, but students make the choice to opt for such courses and may not have known the differences in the structure and expectations. In the current situation, both parties are involuntary participants.

In reviewing the literature for reports on student etiquette within online virtual classes, there was a single article that addressed online class etiquette, per se, and that article was directed towards the students’ value of social presence, i.e. how the students appreciated being nice to one another and to faculty, beyond the typical co-presence of the student and faculty (i.e. being nice to the faculty) through the class (Conrad, 2010). However, there is a relevant and illuminating set of discussions emanating from a larger ongoing project on online learning conducted by the Community College Research Center (Teachers College, Columbia University), which examined the variables related to the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the online context. Using a qualitative approach, Bork and Rucks-Ahidiana (2013) explored roles and expectations of students and faculty in online courses in two community colleges. The roles of students and faculty in face-to-face classrooms versus in the online context differ in significant ways, and to what extent these roles and expectations not clarified, by the instructor and made explicit to the students, leads to ‘frustration, confusion and tension among both students and instructors’ (Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013, p. 2). We have termed these roles and expectations and the behaviours that are consequent to them, ‘online etiquette’. The majority of students and instructors in educational settings have been socialised in the context of face-to-face instruction, and those roles and expectations, which may differ somewhat based on region or country, are reasonably well codified and relatively unambiguous. However, as stated earlier, both these groups have been thrust into a situation where, at least for the foreseeable future, face-to-face educational settings in their entirety or in the majority, are unlikely. Here, we briefly explore the challenges that both faculty and students continue to face with these distance learning virtual classrooms and attempt to offer some practical considerations and equitable perspectives to best guide both faculty and students to encourage and support more professional behaviours in these new learning formats.

**Difficulties students face**

Students may face a series of issues when trying to participate in distance learning through virtual classes, which in turn, may reduce their ability to focus their
attention on the material, retain the information from the virtual lecture and actively participate in meaningful discussions due to environmental and situation-specific difficulties. Some of the difficulties that students face may be, but are not limited to: lack of a private/quiet area within their home environment, inability to have someone else watch their child/parent, too close proximities with other members of the household causing distractions, domestic animals in the background, etc. Additionally, students may face privacy issues and concerns where they may not want to turn on their computer camera because: they do not want people to look at them or the environment in which they live; they did not get themselves together for the day; the only place they can participate in the virtual class is their personal bedroom and they do not want people to see it; they are concerned with their social economic status and do not want others to pass judgements of them based upon their living conditions. Many of these factors are exacerbated by underlying conditions of disparity and inequity of resources.

These are all legitimate concerns that may explain why students are reluctant to turn on their computer cameras. However, students do not realise that their decision to not join in on the distance learning lectures through their computer camera directly impacts their psychological engagement in the virtual classroom, and this lack of engagement reduces their interactive learning (Codreanu & Celik, 2013). This behaviour also defeats the purpose of the design and pedagogy of the online course (Coy et al., 2014). Clearly, students need assistance and guidance to apprise them of the ways in which they are depriving themselves of the quality of their education. It is incumbent on us, as faculty, to design strategies that will help them to navigate these difficulties in order to optimise their distance learning given the evolving COVID-19 situation.

**Expectations of faculty**

While participation and engagement, and therefore learning, is diminished by the literal invisibility of the students within the virtual classroom when they turn off their computer cameras, the teaching aspect of the academic endeavour is severely constrained for the faculty. For many faculty, especially those who have in past practice primarily elected to teach in the traditional classroom, the visual feedback from their students provide critical input. The visual feedback from students enables faculty to gauge student comprehension of concepts in real-time. This is true whether or not the material is being presented in face-to-face or distance learning virtual formats. Thus, being able to see students through virtual synchronous live lectures is important for faculty so they can modify the pedagogy, pacing and presentation of concepts of the course, and ensure that the learning objectives are being reasonably met. Unfortunately, it is difficult, if not impossible for faculty to assess within the virtual lecture whether or not a student is actively attending, participating and understanding/following along with the material, etc. when the student is not using their computer camera.
However, as stated earlier, this faculty expectation may not appear reasonable to some students and may not be feasible for others. Some students may possess a learning device that does not have a built-in or functional camera. More importantly, cellular phones and most tablets limit many features of the virtual classroom. Just as one case in point, the hand-raising feature present in several learning management systems (LMS) is not necessarily enabled on the tablet and cellular phone versions of these same LMS (i.e. challenges faced through use of mobile Blackboard; for review, see Alkhaldi & Abualkishik, 2019). Many students may be fulfilling job duties considered essential services and may not have the ability to access their laptops for extended periods of time during the virtual class. Therefore, even when students are making a sincere effort to maintain their academic engagement, there are practical limitations imposed by technology during this pandemic. Given these constraints, how can faculty preserve the quality of the education in the virtual classroom?

**Suggestions for developing online etiquette and professional behaviours**

Dennen et al. (2007) in their study of student performance and satisfaction in online courses, point to the fact that instructors argue that their students’ performances are based on the effectiveness of their presentation of the content and their mechanisms of providing feedback on the demonstration of the learning of that content. However, student satisfaction is intimately based on the students’ perceptions that they are treated as individuals, and that their communications are heard and attended to. In the online context, many of the interpersonal aspects of communication may also be absent: postural/gestural responses and adjustments, inflections and emphasis, and emotional tone. These are particularly absent, obviously, in asynchronous virtual classrooms. We have identified a few compromises that may engage students and faculty in more productive ways, circumventing the lack of student computer camera usage during virtual classes.

**Attendance**

For purposes of ensuring attendance, faculty can request that students verbally and/or visually (e.g. by turning on their microphones and/or computer cameras) confirm their presence at the start of the class session. Some LMS also provide a report about the duration that students were logged into the class and the frequency and duration of their leaving the class (i.e. logging off). Obviously, this report does not give any assurance of active participation; however, some LMS (e.g. Blackboard Ultra) have a feature of indicating in real-time if and when students log off. It has been the experience of the authors that when faculty are vigilant about this log on/log off behaviour (i.e. in a chat or in an email after class) that students become less likely to wander. It should be noted that sometimes this legitimately may be due to internet issues; however, vigilance on the part of faculty
and their explicit acknowledgement of their vigilance, pays off. Ultimately, students will become more mindful of their behaviour. It is important to note here that we have discussed in detail the Blackboard LMS, but other Colleges/Universities, especially outside of the United States, may use an alternative LMS (i.e. Moodle, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.). For example, Zoom has very similar features as Blackboard and Microsoft Teams, except that its quality of video conferencing is far superior. In contrast, Moodle also has many features as Blackboard, but has been largely known as the world’s largest open source online LMS. Nevertheless, there are a number of different LMS options that faculty can consider to adapt to the challenges of the pandemic when switching to remote/distance learning as the new normal.

**Participation and engagement**

Student participation can be actively solicited by faculty frequently pausing and asking students to raise their hands using a previously mentioned hand raising feature present in several LMS to answer questions and make comments. Another very useful feature is the poll feature, which allows both engagement and interaction with the student, but also can be used for real-time assessment of concepts, using the multiple-choice format. Another means to foster interaction in the virtual classroom is the use of discussion boards/forums which can be set up for pre-class input, similar to just-in-time teaching (see Carter, 2012; Novak, 2011) for priming student memory of curricular content. This also applies to post-virtual classes to ensure comprehension and retention of curricular content (For more details on synchronous knowledge and skill trait acquisition during distance learning, see Politis & Politis, 2016.).

However, it has been our experience that students will not voluntarily use discussion boards/forums; therefore, in order to be effective, these activities need to be integrated into the regular learning activities and outcome assessments. Further, discussion boards will not be effective in promoting interactions between the members of the class, unless students are explicitly directed to read and comment on posts of their classmates. As we have noted earlier, students are much less likely to ask direct questions or ask for clarifications in class. We have found that post-class discussion boards where students are asked to respond to specific questions based on issues covered in class, are very effective in quickly identifying misconceptions or misapprehensions that may have occurred during the class (for review, see Johnson, 2007; Servonsky et al., 2005). Faculty, can in short order, correct such misapprehensions and make the necessary clarifications available, either in postings on the discussion boards or briefly announcing the corrections in the following class. One advantage with this type of use of a discussion board is that corrections or clarifications can be distributed to the class as a whole, just as would be the case when responding to a student response in real-time, in a face-to-face class.
Breakout groups is another feature which can promote engagement and peer-to-peer interactions. These can be used for student discussions in small groups and reporting back to the larger class, or posting on discussion boards. Combining the breakout groups with the discussion board posts, again allows not just for interaction, but a more enriched and interactive learning experience. There is ample literature that supports that peer-to-peer instruction is very effective (Carmichael & MacEachen, 2017; Katsifli et al., 2010). It has been our consistent experience that students will present explanations or provide illustrations of concepts that facilitate the learning process of their peers. Breakout groups and discussion boards are very useful instructional tools that can be quite effective pedagogical tools that foster and promote this type of enriched student teaching and learning within virtual classrooms.

These diverse pedagogical strategies can help faculty feel more assured that they are maintaining the quality of their curricula and student learning outcomes through these teaching/learning communication modalities in virtual formats, but they could also serve to enhance student engagement and learning in ways previously underexplored (see Figure 1). In Figure 1, students are depicted in green and faculty in yellow. The students are able to interact with faculty through the virtual classroom through a number of communication modalities (i.e. visually through computer camera and filters, non-visually but actively through text and chat, and non-visually but more passively through raising their hand and polls). These visual and non-visual functions can be used in combination or separately for students to communicate in dynamic set of ways with faculty through virtual classroom instruction. Notably, providing sufficient flexibility for students to interact with faculty in the virtual classroom by being afforded choices and combinations of communication modalities would support a diverse group of college student’s learning styles/preferences through virtual instruction (for review, see Neuwirth et al., 2018, 2019).

**Visual presence and self-presentation**

Thus far, we have considered some specific faculty strategies for encouraging students’ interaction and participation. However, we have not discussed another set of issues that is particular to the virtual classroom setup. This is the issue of helping students and their self-presentation behaviours during live synchronous lectures. For example, a student may be comfortable lying in bed in their pajamas and joining the virtual class. This presents the problem of tempting the student to go back to sleep or remain in a leisure rather than academic mode (i.e. context-dependent conditioning; Lynch et al., 2006), which has a long learning history that is suddenly being challenged. Thus, this presents a challenge for students to break one routine in order to create another within the same environment with competing stimuli (Munby et al., 2003). Students can avoid such issues by getting up fully and gathering themselves as though they were leaving the house, then trying to sit in a chair with a table to differentiate their comfort postures from their schoolwork.
postures in their environment to the best of their ability. This is perhaps a behaviour that can be explicitly discussed, emphasised and made part of the expectations of the virtual class.

Further, students can limit the concern for what other’s opinions/judgements of them might be regarding their video background by either using a digital filter for a virtual background, using blurring options for their real background, or by positioning themselves with a blank wall behind them. Students can still engage in the virtual classroom in the communication modality of their preference to remain attentive and focused on the material (Codreanu & Celik, 2013; Kidd & Beaudry, 2013). Again, here, it is important to note and reinforce that many of these faculty considerations need to be modified when students log in using cellular phones and tablets and not their laptops/computers.

Figure 1. The figure illustrates a suggested model to guide faculty for developing more active engagement through virtual online instruction. The faculty person (yellow) delivers the curriculum through the virtual classroom (light grey box) to the students (green). Students can choose to use different modalities based on their preference to synchronously engage with their class peers and faculty course instructor in the virtual classroom through: (1) their webcam or filters (i.e. digital background or turn off their video input), (2) text or chat, and (3) raise their virtual hand or participate in polls. The faculty can also set up discussion boards (dark grey trapezoids) pre-virtual class (for synchronous just-in-time teaching) or post-virtual class (asynchronous teaching) to provide students with more flexibility for active and passive forms of engagement in the virtual class. Virtual classes can be recorded to offer more flexible asynchronous reviewing for students that were unable to attend the synchronous virtual lecture, along with re-play options. It is important to note that faculty synchronous feedback occurs through the virtual classroom (depicted by the stippled line in the light grey box) based on the student’s preferred communication modality.
Maintaining faculty and student expectations: Balancing rigour with compassion

We are very cognizant of the fact that there are new and unfamiliar demands and pressures arising from the current abrupt transition from face-to-face classroom format to a virtual one. We have attempted to delineate some suggestions that can address and attenuate various pressures students may be facing, as well as form the basis for building professional skills and behaviours that will benefit the student beyond the classroom. There is, however, another set of concerns that are also intrinsic to the context of the current crisis, but which seems to have engendered little dialogue: the pressures and demands placed on faculty to maintain rigour and academic performance expectations. In many institutions, Instructional Technology Support Teams immediately swung into action to support the faculty in making the transition. This transition was probably a lot smoother and easier in some institutions which may have had a strong online curriculum delivery system. However, in many cases, and it is true for the authors of this current article, most faculty had to adapt very rapidly to the change in format. Learning outcomes for a course and their assessment in the face-to-face classroom do not always readily conform to assessment in the virtual context. This is a non-trivial issue if, for example, class participation and interaction was an identified component of their overall grade. Given some of the real constraints on participation and engagement that we have discussed above, how should those components of performance be equitably assessed for a virtual classroom?

There is a need for faculty to design some alternate methods of assessing the participation component of their courses. This is of particular importance in seminar-style classes. Activities such as student presentations, group demonstrations or interactive discussions are often foundational activities in seminar-style classes, in the traditional format. Transitioning to the virtual format has required faculty, in very short order, to institute alternative assessment methods, typically through new assignments, which students (rightfully, in some ways) have resisted because it appears to be added requirements/work. This midstream re-envisioning and re-designing the learning outcomes and their associated assessment has been a real added burden on faculty, who are already struggling to adapt to learning the new and unfamiliar technologies associated with distance learning. Many faculty report that these negotiations can be difficult, since in practice it has required that students do additional activities or assignments. Understandably, students already overwhelmed, are resistant to adopting additional new assignments and activities. Faculty report that when the purpose of, and expectations for, these added activities/assignments and their connection to the learning of the content is made explicit to students, there is a lowering of resistance and greater participation.

One last issue also needs to be raised, and it is perhaps the thorniest of all. There has not been, as far as we know any in-depth discussion of this issue. For many students, as we have noted earlier, there are very real psychological, economic and pragmatic burdens and constraints stemming from the pandemic on
their ability to fulfil the requirements for a class. It could be argued that genuine compassion for the students might lead faculty to lower or lessen some of those demands. How should faculty approach changing expectations or the demand for rigour, when trying to be genuinely sensitive to the needs of their students? We do not profess to have an answer to this question. Yet it is one that many faculty are facing. There is a sore need for an open dialogue among faculty about this issue.

Summary/Conclusion

The COVID-19 situation has propelled students and faculty into a new realm of remote/distance learning through virtual classrooms. These rapid transitions from traditional face-to-face classes to virtual classrooms have brought about a series of considerations that faculty and students must address and come to a compromise in order to achieve a mutual and meaningful collaborative learning and social space. The need for student and faculty collaboration is critical, even more so with adult learners, as flexibility must be available for both parties to actively engage through the online platform used (see Joiner, 2004). Further, FGC and FGI students may rely heavily on faculty mentorship, consultation and ongoing feedback on their progress within course and across their college experiences normally, and given the pandemic, may require even more faculty outreach and communication opportunities to check in as they might lack academic role models. Therefore, faculty serving a diverse population of undergraduate students may truly see themselves as second-line responders to help encourage and shepherd students through these very difficult transitions and helping them persevere through the pandemic.

Here we briefly provided some practical considerations for virtual classrooms, based on our experiences in New York, at the epicentre of the pandemic, which might prove useful to other educators seeking to increase their student etiquette and professional behaviours while in distance learning/virtual classroom formats. These suggestions, from our unique perspective, may also prove useful to enrich the ongoing distance learning delivery of the curriculum to ensure student learning outcomes are being met during the pandemic. Further, these suggestions may help to improve hybrid and online teaching formats during the post evolving and COVID-19 era in the future as different interactive modalities for communicating during the current crisis have proven useful. However, in review of the literature in the field, shockingly, there lacks a clear and operationalised definition of etiquette for online remote/distance learning classes. We suggest that the field consider the following definition to begin to concentrate on these issues more reliably: (1) the behavioural engagement of students through turning on their computer cameras, using the raise hand tools, chat box, unmuting their microphones, and answering or asking questions while during the synchronous lectures; (2) in asynchronous formats, the behavioural engagement of students through discussion boards immediately following or prior to lecture by answering questions fully. These two operationalised definitions will help to shape the conversation in the field to better
assess and evaluate online remote/distance learning approaches and etiquette as we all continue to face the evolving post-pandemic educational climate. In closing, we hope that initiating this discussion to a broad audience of educators may serve to develop a larger/timely conversation across the field to make thoughtful considerations for crafting guides on best practices for remote teaching and pedagogic innovation to prepare students for a physically distant, but socially near time-period.

Authors’ contributions
LSN, SJ and BRM conceived of the rapid report, created the framework for this timely issue, wrote and approved the manuscript.

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