

# Adult Learners, Remote Learning, and the COVID Pandemic: Restructuring Education Doctorate Courses in Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

This essay serves as the narrative of an early career Assistant Professor as they recall their struggles, vulnerabilities, and insecurities while navigating the need to shift their educational leadership doctoral students to emergency remote learning amid a global pandemic. Using the foundations of transformational experiences for adult learners, the need to sustain the students' communities of practice, and positive school leadership, the author develops and executes their action plan to meet the needs of their adult learners and support them in the online environment during the COVID-19 crisis. By applying this framework as practicing EdD scholars, we serve as a model for future directions in the teaching spaces of the Education Doctorate by bridging the gap between theory and practice in our higher education teaching spaces.

## KEYWORDS

*educational doctorate, COVID-19, adult learners, communities of practice, positive school leadership*

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) determined the COVID-19 outbreak was classified as a world-wide pandemic. The Director-General of the WHO stated, "we cannot say this loudly enough, or clearly enough, or often enough...all countries can still change the course of this pandemic...detect, test, treat, isolate, trace, and mobilize their people in the response" (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a). In mid-March, officials in the United States (U.S.) reported more than 10,750 confirmed cases of the COVID-19 viral disease and over 150 deaths. All fifty states reported cases, yet massive outbreaks were confined to only a few states, including New York, Washington, and California (Dwyer, 2020). Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York State, who arguably will become the most vocal of state-level politicians calling for more federal aid in combatting COVID-19, reported a U.S. Navy hospital ship was preparing to deploy to New York Harbor to support medical centers in New York City that were facing a surge of patients (Dwyer, 2020). Not even a week later, Governor Cuomo reported the New York State infection rate was doubling every three days (Chappell, 2020). At the same time, Illinois Governor J. B. Pritzker issued a "stay-at-home" order limiting residents to visiting only grocery stores, gas stations, pharmacies, and to take walks outside (Chicago Tribune Staff, 2020).

This is the narrative from mid-March to early May of an early career Assistant Professor as they recall their struggles, vulnerabilities, and insecurities while navigating the need to shift their educational leadership doctoral students to remote learning amid a global pandemic. This essay begins with the author's journaling of their experiences and transitions to literature on transformational experiences for adult learners (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010; Mezirow, 2000), the need to sustain the students' communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015), and positive school

leadership (Kutsyruba & Walker, 2015; Stefkovich & Shapiro, 2003). Next, based on these frameworks, the author shares their process for supporting the needs of their adult learners in the online environment during the onset of the COVID crisis. Finally, the author concludes with implications for future practice, where they suggest practicing EdD scholars apply similar frameworks as we prepare our educational leaders to become well-equipped scholarly practitioners. In this way, we serve as models for future directions in the teaching spaces of the Education Doctorate by bridging the gap between theory and practice in our higher education teaching spaces.

## THE FIRST MONTH (IN PANDEMIC TIMES)

My partner was away the second week in March during my Spring Break meeting for his low residency course. When we spoke, he told me about his new students, their promising works of fiction, and his successful writing salon. In return, I grumbled about the massive lightning storms and loss of electricity for the first two evenings he was away. Meanwhile, my father in New York State, called me regularly to check in on me. He constantly reminded me to watch the news which I tried to avoid. Nevertheless, those pesky news app notifications on the growing COVID-19 crisis infiltrated my eyes, ears, and mind.

On Thursday, my partner returned home. By that time, my COVID-19 anxieties were skyrocketing. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020b) reported 125,260 cases and 4,613 deaths worldwide from COVID-19. In the United States (U.S.), there were 987 cases and 29 deaths. We talked about the situation, considered my father's advice, and deliberated our next steps to prepare our small family for the onset of the virus. Because we were



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This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press.



This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) [cpedinitiative.org](http://cpedinitiative.org)

[impactinged.pitt.edu](http://impactinged.pitt.edu)  
Vol. 6 No. 2 (2021)

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/ie.2021.160



in a privileged situation, we placed an order at our local big box store. Toilet paper, tissues, disinfectant wipes and spray, water, and some canned goods were ready for us to pick up the next day.

### Stay-At-Home Order: Directive to Transition to Remote Learning

After we unloaded our supplies and arranged them in our basement make-shift pantry, I checked my email. The University President sent out an email to all personnel saying that we would not return to campus on Monday. The University was extending spring break for another week, into the third week of March, and students were strongly discouraged from returning to campus. During this extended time, teaching faculty members and staff personnel were directed to shift all classes to remote learning for a March 23<sup>rd</sup> launch date. No other information was provided.

With this directive, I went into full panic mode. I was confused and overly anxious. These emotions were activating my insecurities, in hyper speed. With these overwhelming feelings, I immediately thought of the television series, *Star Trek: Picard*. In the most recent episode, in a desperate act to make sense of her new reality, Soji, the synthetic daughter of Data, usurped control of the ship navigating through a Borg wormhole. Following this unconventional and dangerous transit, Picard and the crew arrived at Soji's home world, Coppelius. I was desperate, like Soji, to make sense of what was happening. I was new to my position, this university, and this city. Because I was in my first year as an Assistant Professor, I was unfamiliar with many of the support services at the University. I knew even less about services in the community, and other vulnerability questions surged through my mind. Most importantly, because I doubted my own ability to navigate a pandemic, I was floundering in an unfamiliar wormhole, as I questioned my ability to best support my doctoral students.

At this time, I experienced what I imagine most other people were experiencing, as well. For better or for worse, I withdrew. I binged the new season of *Ozark* to get away from the reality of pandemic times as I journeyed into a world of money laundering, shady political moves, and some major turf issues. I ate pizza, lots of pizza (and not the good kind), coupled with an adult beverage or two. When my binge was complete and my stomach was full, I still did not have a solution for how to best serve my students.

After the weekend passed, I struggled to get back on track to consider my possibilities for transitioning my doctoral students to remote learning. Since I needed support, I spoke to my trusted colleagues. Some of my colleagues were still reeling, but others were pushing forward. After their caring and humble words, they shared their visions and strategies for remote learning. In addition, I explored new social media networks created to support those in my field. For example, I became members of several Facebook groups, such as Higher Ed Learning Collective, Qualitative Research in Education, and I Should Be Writing. These networks became a valuable resource for me, as well. I was inspired by the informative posts about supporting students in our unprecedented times and helpful strategies to ease the transition to remote learning in crisis. Through the conversations with my colleagues and the insights I gained from my membership in social media groups, my confidence increased.

With this foundation, I started to reflect on my former research projects. I considered my past interviews and observations of the school leaders in my studies. Moreover, I contemplated how these

current educational leaders, existing as adult learners in a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) space, could inform my actions in our current crisis. As a result, I considered transformational experiences for adult learners, communities of practice, and Positive School Leadership (PSL) frameworks as they seemed to be the most fitting to my current situation.

### THREE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS THAT INFLUENCED COURSE REVISION EFFORTS

#### Transformational Experiences for Adult Learners in Postgraduate Programs

Most college students experience transformational learning while attending an institution of higher education (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010; Mezirow, 1991; 2000). According to Mezirow (2000), transformational learning is defined as "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning schemes, habits of mind, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions" (p. 8). Then, these transformed beliefs and opinions are justified and guide students' future actions.

Although not the only framework for learning, transformative learning is built on the assumption that adult learners carry with them an abundance of experiences which serve as the foundation of their assumptions (Stevens et al., 2010). Then, to be truly transformative, students must engage in a critical self-examination of their assumptions and beliefs as interpreted by the learner (Stevens et al., 2010). As a result of critical thinking, reflective discourse, and actionable change (Stevens et al., 2010), adult learners use these transformational experiences to build new perspectives for their personal and/or professional lives (Mezirow, 1991).

Further, whether students have a perspective transformation or are engaged in transformational learning, students (re)imagine their sense of self and their social roles with a different lens (Mezirow, 1991). In a postgraduate program, students (re)examine their fundamental beliefs, desires, and values and how these relate to their mission in life (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010). As they unlearn old perspectives and process new learning, students consider their role using a larger community perspective. For example, in the doctoral classroom, the justice-based frameworks used in my classes notably transform my students' ways of thinking about educational leadership as an opportunity for more equitable and sustainable outcomes for their students, families, and community.

#### Communities of Practice

In graduate school, when students bond and form a group with shared concerns, problems, passion, and advanced learning, a community of practice is formed (Wenger-Trayner, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). These bonds within their community of practice are informally created to share knowledge, solve problems, and support each other (Wenger, 1998). These communities of practice become vital for student learning, support, and persistence through their programs.

Communities of practice vary in size and scope. These can form in programs, departments, throughout the university, or across several institutions of higher education. They can be recognizable or discreet. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) refer to three



structural elements of communities of practice: the domain, the community, and the practice. The domain is the tie that binds communities of practice together. Serving as the domain of knowledge, the common interests, topics, and problems establish the legitimized foundation for the community of practice. The community constitutes the regular participants in the community of practice. Moreover, participants in the community, interact regularly to share ideas and collectively learn and lead together. Notably, these consistent, voluntary interactions build solidarity through trust and commitment. Finally, the practice is a collective way of behaving, positioning ways of thinking, and setting up ethical grounding with shared resources, such as frameworks, tools, and best practices. For example, in the current situation, the practices included CPED cohorts working collaboratively on content resources, like shared readings enriched by dialogue, course embedded fieldwork, and guidance for their professional practice.

In sum, graduate students may seek transformative experiences and form communities of practice to share knowledge, develop expertise, and offer support to one another. To best serve my transformative, community-based students, I needed to adopt a familiar leadership framework to guide my actions with respect to instruction and support of students during the onset of the pandemic. Based on these needs, I chose Positive School Leadership (PSL) to provide support and build relationships between teachers (or professors, in this case) and students.

### Positive School Leadership

By rejecting the top-down, managerial approaches to leadership, educational leadership methods shift to more collaborative approaches (Sergiovanni, 1994). These leadership alternatives incorporate authentic participation, value contributions offered among roles, and value relationships built within the institution. PSL is one of these alternatives, which embraces a concern for the wellness of their community by supporting teachers and students beyond the bounded nature of managerial leadership (DeMartino, 2021). To generate individual and group growth, positive school leaders seek to connect, inspire, and encourage others in their community (Murphy & Louis, 2018). Like communities of practice, PSL works from the perspective of viewing schools as communities (DeMartino, 2021). Thus, instead of viewing leadership as one of managing organizations, PSL works by setting up and maintaining trusting relationships and consistently practicing care in schools.

### Building and Maintaining Trust

Building trust is essential for school leaders to build common goals. Nevertheless, building trust in educational institutions tends not to be a priority in many schools and universities. In fact, many institutions create gatekeepers and other barriers resulting in growing distrust among members of their community. By comparison, proponents of PSL embrace the idea that leaders promote trust within their greater communities (Noonan et al., 2008).

PSL emphasizes building and maintaining trust with the community as necessary for moral agency and ethical decision-making within the institution (Kutsyruba & Walker, 2015). Five aspects for building trust in school communities are benevolence, or the feelings of caring and vulnerability; honesty and integrity; openness; reliability, or the predictability of leadership behaviors; and competence, the ability to perform appropriate leadership tasks

(Noonan et al., 2008). By modeling trust, school leaders are normalizing trust in their respective communities. One way to preserve trust with the greater community is to promote these relationships by practicing care.

### Practicing Caring in Educational Institutions

Caring in schools cultivates the sense of community in educational institutions (Author, 2020; Noddings, 2013). Because caring is rewarding both for the leader and the rest of the school community, positive school leaders nurture their relationships by drawing upon their moral standards. First, leaders must be motivated by care and practice caring in all matters. Accordingly, Marshall, Patterson, Rogers, and Steele (1996) described the practice of caring as a “moral touchstone ... [involving] fidelity to relationships with others that is based [on] more than just personal liking or regard ... [and emphasizing the] responsibility to others rather than to rights and rules” (pp. 277-278). Next, leaders must promote caring in their communities. Stefkovich and Shapiro (2003) indicate the need for leaders, in post-secondary communities of care, to guide others with concern and prioritize connectedness among members. This cultivation of caring begins with leaders and transforms into something bigger than the leaders when caring is extended to and through the greater community.

### AN ACTION PLAN: CAPITALIZING ON TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCES, COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE, AND POSITIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DURING A CRISIS

After processing what I knew about graduate students' experiences and positive school leadership, I wanted to personify a school leader with the ability to inspire transformational actions centered on trust and acts of caring. First, I wrestled with my own feelings of trust and care as my personal issues with showing vulnerability appeared. I wanted to be open, reliable, and competent, but I was hesitant and insecure. After deep reflection, I crafted an email of support to my students. In the email, I responded to our current crisis by recognizing that it was okay not to be okay, acknowledged their need to enact professional and personal obligations from their homes, and encouraged them to prioritize what was most important, and not worry, if the class was of secondary importance at this time.

### We Are in This Together

First, I wanted to reassure my students that it is okay not to be okay. It was okay to cry. It was okay not to be perfect. It was okay to ‘just get by.’ As their professor, I wanted to share my struggles in solidarity with my students. I was honest and vulnerable with them. I told them the truth. I was day-to-day. Some days were good, some were productive, some were sad, and some were just chaotic. This became the foundation for our bond of trust through our shared crisis.

Next, I explained my understanding of their extraordinary circumstances. If they were not working with a skeleton crew at their schools, I understood most of them were transitioning to professional and personal obligations in the home. This meant working at home with partners, spouses, children, roommates, extended family, friends, and pets. They were juggling work, family, and school. All of



this in the middle of a pandemic. I was standing there with them and we were going to get through this.

Finally, in my email, I stressed the importance of taking time for themselves and their families over the weekend. I reminded them our classes would resume on Monday. We would review changes to our syllabus and shift to asynchronous, remote learning. I concluded my email by listing my weekend activities, a virtual Home Safari with the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, a phone call to my parents, streaming one of my favorite bands on Instagram Live, bingeing a new series on Netflix, and playing my partner in a heated Monopoly match. It was important for me to humanize our shared experiences as we moved into our forced remote learning environment.

### Our Shift to Remote Learning

To respect our shared challenges, I transitioned our course to asynchronous learning, cut any unnecessary material and assignments, and conducted weekly virtual office hours. Our asynchronous learning modules were limited. We had few online discussions and case studies due in the next 6 weeks, but we needed to finish our state-mandated, course-embedded fieldwork projects. Because I knew these were the standards they would be tested on for professional certification, these projects could not be sacrificed. By dropping unneeded work, they were able to focus on these projects and the competencies, which were to be developed.

Although we transitioned to an asynchronous design, I embedded weekly contact in the form of virtual office hours. These were set up on a continuous basis for the rest of the course and held during the first half hour of their regularly scheduled class. The first meeting was mandatory as I walked them through our updated syllabus. All the others were voluntary and open for drop-ins. These remaining office hours were a designated time for any questions or clarifications on the remaining projects. Some were just as I described, whereas others were a time to talk through how we were feeling and coping. They were informal and a well needed break for all of us. I needed that social time just as much as my students. I am so thankful to them.

In sum, this process was difficult and not seamless, to say the least. I wanted to be the leader who practiced trust and caring in my actions, but vulnerability almost got the best of me. It took deep reflection, many conversations with my colleagues, and support from my new social media groups. Rinse and repeat. And another, rinse and repeat. Yet, in the end, taking inspiration from theory, including transformational experiences, communities of practice, and PSL, as applied to my practice, we all managed to survive in this new way of learning.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATION DOCTORATE

As I reflected on own my narrative as a university professor, I continued to reexamine the gap between idealistic theory and the real-world practice in K-12 schools and classrooms. Contributing to this theory-to-practice gap, my first concern was the divisive language we use to describe college and university work and work in K-12 schools. As such, college or university work comes from the “ivory tower,” whereas the work in K-12 occurs “in the trenches” (Ketter & Stoffel, 2008). These sentiments are both alienating and reductive as they mirror class differences. These popular terms depict college and university professors as privileged sages and K-

12 professionals as “foot soldiers [who] are taking the risks and doing the grunt work” (Ketter & Stoffel, 2008, p. 129). As college and university professors, we must critically reflect on the use of this language to dismantle the power differences associated with these popular terms.

Second, as professors in CPED programs, the CPED Framework and the Guiding Principles are available as a resource to inform our work in order to better prepare scholarly practitioners by bridging the gap between theory and practice in our teaching spaces. In this narrative, the author applied the literature and theory of transformational experiences, communities of practice, and PSL to guide their response to the abrupt shift to remote learning at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These frameworks served as beacons for the author to reevaluate their graduate students’ experiences by recognizing the programming was potentially transformational allowing students to (re)imagine their sense of self and their social roles with a different lens and grounding themselves in their communities of practice while they relied on each other for support through the program. Then, by adopting PSL in their actions, the author attempted to personify a positive school leader with the ability to inspire transformational actions centered on trust and acts of caring.

In sum, as scholars teaching in CPED spaces, we should follow the CPED Framework and the Guiding Principles by basing our decision making and actions on the premise of authentically preparing our educational leaders to become well-equipped scholarly practitioners. As we support the development of scholarly practitioners by asking students to construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference and integrating both practical and research knowledge, we must do the same. In this way, we serve as models by bridging the gap between theory and practice in our CPED teaching and learning spaces.

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