



The Balance of Roles: Graduate Student Perspectives during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted personal and professional lives. Graduate students juggle a variety of roles and had to quickly adjust. In this article, six graduate students share their reflections regarding the influence of the pandemic on respective stages in their doctoral program. They provide unique personal and professional perspectives that depict their abrupt shift to remote working and remote learning. The intention of this article is to garner an understanding of graduate students' challenges during the pandemic, capture their strategies for success, and provide a space for further conversation and support about how the pandemic has impacted graduate students.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Doctoral students · Emergency remote learning · Graduate students · Graduate student roles · Higher education · Remote work

Introduction

After the COVID-19 outbreak, education shifted to remote learning, and daily and professional lives quickly changed (Daniel, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Zraick & Garcia, 2020). Within this change, graduate students had to juggle a

variety of professional and personal adjustments beyond their student role. This paper focuses on the experiences of six graduate students on the effect the pandemic had on their lives. The students are at various stages in their programs—some are completing their coursework and some are working through their dissertation. Each student brings a unique professional and personal perspective of COVID-19 and their abrupt shift to remote working and learning.

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Parent Perspective by Pauline Muljana

Who would have thought that Friday 13th, 2020 would be the last day of ‘normal?’ I am a parent of two school-age children, and on that Friday the 13th, I received the announcement from the school district—schools would be closed starting Monday with students learning at home. I immediately asked myself, “How will I complete my coursework with the kids staying at home?”

During the first 3 weeks, I was struggling and my kids were confused. Instructions from the school kept changing and my own tasks were neglected. I needed a strategy. I started by identifying my essential tasks to complete the semester successfully. I chunked those tasks into bite-size tasks and created two categories: tasks that needed deep concentration and those that did not. I also created a daily schedule dividing the day between mornings and afternoons. In the morning, I helped the kids with their schoolwork. While helping them, I could

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accomplish the tasks that did not need deep concentration (e.g., searching for articles). In the afternoon, the kids conducted their independent activities (e.g., free play and arts) while I worked on tasks that needed deep concentration (e.g., writing).

This strategy was not perfect. There were times when I could not complete my daily tasks. Although this schedule is not the ‘normal’ we knew before Friday the 13th, this strategy allowed me to finish my spring semester!

Instructional Designer Perspective by Kae Novak

I am an instructional designer in Colorado and a doctoral student at the University of Colorado - Denver. Spring 2020 was supposed to be a quiet semester for instructional designers and educational technologists like me. There was no Learning Management System (LMS) migration this semester, and all known issues were manageable. Nevertheless, my team’s quiet semester imploded. Every faculty member wanted to change their F2F course into an online course immediately. We were bombarded with emails, phone calls, and drop-ins. All new development of courses stopped, and the next 6 weeks seemed like an endless stream of individual just-in-time training on how to use tools in the LMS or how to hold class over WebEx. We created shortcuts and heuristics to help. We discovered emails were faster to read and respond to than voicemails, so we stopped taking voicemail requests. We had to endlessly explain that technology is not magic, sometimes it does not work. Size also matters—there will probably be a delay uploading a four-hour lecture you just recorded into the LMS!

This did not just spill into my doctoral classes, it consumed them. There was no balance. Everything became remote learning! My semester paper ended up focusing on remote learning. In courses, as the only ed-tech doctoral student, I was asked to help figure out every setting on Zoom, Google documents, and determine what tech we could use for final presentations. I had to forgo any strategy for balance and instead fully immerse.

Faculty Perspective by Irene Bal

I planned to be away for 10 days, not knowing I would be gone for most of the semester. I am an online lecturer in Educational Technology at Loyola University Maryland and an online doctoral student at Old Dominion University (ODU). Working and learning in online programs allows me to travel but adding a pandemic in the middle of a semester, while traveling, shifted my life considerably.

At first, the challenges were in managing my time between family, learning, and teaching. This didn’t seem to be much of a shift since I was already working and learning online, but that quickly changed when stay-at-home orders altered my travel plans, my learners needed more flexibility, and my

PhD courses began again with half of my course materials 600 miles away. I was suddenly redesigning my courses, working on my schoolwork with limited materials, and worrying about my cat as I extended my trip from 10 to 40 days.

Whenever I get overwhelmed, I tell myself, “Keep It Simple, Silly” By late March, I decided to follow my advice and keep it simple. I reworked my Loyola courses to better support my learners, I contacted the ODU library for access to course materials, and I got a friend to watch my cat. Essentially, I made it work and followed the Keep It Simple, Silly phrase, to successfully finish my spring semester and return home!

Administrator Perspective by Zixin Mao

“Embrace the suck!” I could almost hear this motivational speech from my Drill Sergeant as I worked late into the night. Ten weeks had passed since COVID-19 overloaded our IT Department and compared to the 10 weeks I spent at the Army Basic Training, these past 10 weeks went by in a blur of Zoom meetings and document revisions.

As the Associate Director of Information and Faculty Technology at our business school, it has not been easy to balance my job responsibilities with my roles as a doctoral candidate, an adjunct, and a father. The pandemic brought a disproportional amount of work, which cut into my time for the dissertation. In order not to stall my dissertation completely, I switched my activities from literature review to reflection. I made this change because I knew that my mind would not be sharp enough for the literature review after work. Reflection allowed me to organize what I have already read, come up with questions, and identify gaps in my research. My hope is that when the pandemic blows over, I will be on a clearer path to continue my literature review.

Work will continue to be very exhausting for the rest of the year at my department as we convert our courses to a hybrid format. It is a challenge that must be met. Work overload sucks, but I have to try to make the best of the situation, one Zoom meeting at a time.

Instructional Designer Perspective by Kiran Budhrani

Spring break ended with a 30-hour travel across four airports but this time it included frequent handwashing, sanitizer, and face masks. I returned to Charlotte from an Indian wedding and self-quarantined for 14 days. Little did I know that this was the beginning of the ‘new normal’ of remote learning, working from home, and Amazon groceries.

Upon my return, I was caught in the COVID-19 wave of emergency remote learning at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. This was a major disruption in my dual roles as full-time instructional designer and doctoral candidate in the middle of the dissertation process. Nothing could have prepared me for the scale of rapid upskilling needed to

train faculty from every discipline to shift every lesson, activity, assessment, project, or lab online. I felt like a first responder, prioritizing the university needs, while my dissertation moved to the backburner. It became harder to balance my time and remain focused on the dissertation. When asked how I was doing, I often responded that I was “taking it one hour at a time, one day at a time.”

I drew inspiration from the instructional design community on their ideation and creative solution-finding for what I have come to coin as ‘six-feet-apart pedagogy.’ I am proud of my colleagues for their empathy, discernment, and swiftness handling the challenges of COVID-19. My family and friends continue to share their comfort, love, and support. As an instructional designer and graduate student, plans for the next semesters are undecided and erratic... I am still taking it one hour at a time, one day at a time.

Teaching Assistant Perspective by Okan Arslan

As the announcement was sent that the campus was closed and courses were moving to online, I thought, “No big deal!” As a teaching assistant at Texas Tech University, I am responsible for grading and mentoring students in face-to-face and online graduate-level courses. Since one of the courses was already online, I thought I could simply help transform the face-to-face course to an online format. However, I was wrong!

Both courses had a variety of challenges. Due to the influx of communication, students were confused and frustrated. Some of them were overwhelmed, managing the coursework and their full-time jobs, failing to turn in assignments, requesting extensions, and even requesting to withdraw. My no-big-deal attitude changed as I shifted the workload of the courses to support and motivate students to persist. In addition to this, I am working on my dissertation. Balancing the roles between teaching assistant and dissertation writing was challenging. Since I designed my dissertation as an experimental study, I paused my dissertation until there was a clear procedure on conducting such a study during the pandemic.

I first focused my teaching assistantship, supporting the adjustment of project deadlines, course requirements, and meetings to lessen the load for the students and to support

home situations. I also scheduled one-on-one meetings with the students to keep them on track and address their inquiries, and scheduled out-of-class meetings to provide social and emotional support. After things were settled a bit more with the courses, I met with my dissertation supervisor to forecast the barriers for experiments during this time. Eventually, we decided to change the dissertation topic. Now, I have a blank page in front of me with a totally new dissertation topic. Although it is sometimes frustrating, I still have the motivation and the hope to progress on my doctoral journey.

Conclusion

Our dual roles uniquely positioned our perspectives and reactions to COVID-19. To establish a community of support, we reflected on our different perspectives, challenges, and strategies in a webinar hosted by the AECT Graduate Student Assembly. We encourage students to support one another as we are all in this together! You can view our COVID-19 Pandemic Webinar at <https://bit.ly/gsaacovid-19> and connect with other fellow students through social media: Twitter (twitter.com/gsa_aect), Facebook group (facebook.com/groups/aectgsa), Instagram (instagram.com/aectgsa), and Slack (aectgsa.slack.com/).

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