

# **Students' Assessment of an Online Adolescent Development Class During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*COVID-19 disrupted the academic studies of college students across the country during the spring semester of 2020, as classes pivoted quickly to online formats. This study examined the impact of COVID-19 on students in an undergraduate adolescent development class, as well as their assessment of the strategies utilized in the online format of the class. Although students experienced various challenges during the pandemic, their overall assessment of the course was positive with all students reporting that they learned effectively through online instruction, and they increased their understanding of adolescents.*

*Keywords: Student assessments, adolescent development class, COVID-19, online teaching strategies*

## **Introduction**

Almost every college student in America had their education, and perhaps their future plans, disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the middle of spring 2020, the pandemic and its effect on public health forced U.S. colleges and universities to move courses online and send students off-campus. Countless in-person classes pivoted to 100% online delivery for the remainder of the Spring 2020 term, and many remained online for the following academic year as well.

Online course delivery is not new. However, most students in online classes before the pandemic intentionally selected this format for learning, valuing it for its convenience and flexibility. Most of these students were older, non-traditional students, and the online format allowed them to work while obtaining a degree (Harris & Martin, 2012; Keane et al., 2022; Levitz, 2016). In contrast, students who chose in-person classes valued the face-to-face instruction, enjoyed connecting with other learners, and tended to be younger (Harris & Martin, 2012; Kemp & Grieve, 2014).

Regarding college students' perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, studies found that students felt it was safer and more convenient than in-person learning (Hussein et al., 2020; Nambiar, 2020). However, students reported the workload and technology issues associated with online delivery were barriers to their learning (Hussein et al., 2020; Keane et al., 2022).

Literature regarding the impact of COVID-19 on specific college classes is limited, especially going forward to the 2021-2022 academic year (Betz-Hamilton, 2021). By that time, educators had more time to prepare for online instruction as a myriad of instructional opportunities related to effective online delivery was available to them. Likewise, students who were previously exposed to online learning in the spring were more familiar and successful with it the following academic year (Day et al., 2020).

Research regarding the impact of the pandemic on service-learning and other types of experiential learning is also limited. Service-learning is an instructional method in which students learn course content by actively participating in thoughtfully organized service experiences related to that content (ref). Research has shown that service-learning helps students retain more of the concepts learned in class and that students have greater satisfaction with the course (Carson & Domangue, 2013; Duke, 2016; Fenton & Gallant, 2016). In addition, service-learning helps students develop more community awareness, changes students' stereotypical beliefs, and increases their understanding of diversity (Cooke & Kemeny, 2014; Jones & Abes, 2004; Ngai, 2006; Schmidt et al., 2007). Although a valuable learning experience, due to the risks associated with COVID-19, service-learning opportunities essentially ceased to exist during the pandemic (Doody et al., 2020; Grenier et al., 2020).

One service-learning course that experienced the rapid transition to remote instruction during the pandemic was an undergraduate adolescent development class at Appalachian State University. Like other in-person classes at the university, it transitioned to an online format after spring break and continued with that format through the 2020-2021 academic year. How did students in this class feel about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on their educational studies? What challenges did they experience, both with their online learning and their everyday lives? What were their perceptions of their online learning experiences in this course? The purpose of this study was to gain insights about students' perceptions of the pandemic's impact on their educational studies and online learning in this specific adolescent development undergraduate class.

### **Implementation**

Adolescent development is a three-hour service-learning course taught at Appalachian State University. In this class, students examine the basic changes, contexts, and developmental tasks of adolescence through textbook readings, lectures, discussion, videos, and guest speakers. Key topics of the course, include but are not limited to:

- Basic changes of adolescence: biological transitions, cognitive transitions, and social transitions
- Contexts of adolescence: families, peer groups, and schools
- Psychosocial development during adolescence: identity, autonomy, intimacy, sexuality, and achievement

In addition, students complete a service-learning experience that enables them to observe and apply course concepts through interactions with adolescents. Students work with adolescents two hours per week for ten weeks of the semester by serving at community agencies that assist adolescents. Examples of these agencies are:

- Western Youth Network, an after-school program for adjudicated youth
- Upward Bound, a program assisting first-generation college students from low-income families
- Mountain Alliance, an after-school outdoor experiential program

Depending on the site, students engage in a variety of experiences with their adolescents: tutoring, sports activities, arts and crafts, hiking, listening to music, and just "hanging out." Although students are often engaged in group activities, they select one

adolescent upon which to focus their observations and reflections. Throughout the semester, students' service-learning experiences enhance class discussion and promote thoughtful reflection.

Like other classes at Appalachian State University, the adolescent development class transitioned to an online format in the middle of the spring semester of 2020. The class continued online for the 2020-2021 academic year. Although the online class addressed the same adolescent development concepts and information, the teaching methods used in the course were different. The asynchronous online class presented the course in weekly modules, each addressing a different concept/chapter of the text. Each module typically contained the following:

- Instructor notes/videos introducing the module/topic and explaining the learning activities
- PowerPoints/recorded lectures related to the topic
- Study guide for the chapter
- Discussion forum in which students responded to an issue-based prompt, as well as to each other
- Weekly reflection in which students applied and reflected on relevant course concepts

Another change to the adolescent development class was moving the typical in-person tests to online exams which students completed within a window of time wherever they were. Finally, as students were unable to complete service-learning during the pandemic, that project was replaced by an adolescent analysis project utilizing contemporary adolescent movies.

### **Evaluation**

At the end of the Fall 2020 semester, all 23 students completed an online survey evaluating their perceptions of the pandemic's impact on their educational studies and of the adolescent development class. Respondents represented the following majors: family and consumer sciences education, child development, social work, exercise science, elementary education, recreation management, sociology, and psychology. Ten were seniors, eight were juniors, and five were sophomores.

Considering their current situation during the Fall 2020 COVID-19 semester, most students (95.6%) felt it was important to continue their educational studies during the pandemic and felt their living arrangements supported their endeavors (86.9%). In addition, 73.9% of students reported that the formats in which their classes were offered were conducive to their learning, although 17.4% said they were not. More than one-fourth of the students (26%) reported having technology issues with their online learning formats, and 26% also experienced difficulties in completing the amount of work their online classes required. A little over half (52.1%) said they were able to effectively complete their required field experiences either virtually or in person, and 95.6% of students reported that none of their class requirements made them feel unsafe during the pandemic.

When asked to share their greatest challenge to being a successful student during COVID-19 (and these challenges were not limited to the adolescent development course requirements), students provided the following responses:

- Course load: Taking several classes online and trying to keep up with the workload
  - “Online courses aren’t easy for me, and I was taking seven of them”
  - “Balancing multiple classes with a massive workload throughout the semester”
- Course format: Most classes being offered as asynchronous
  - “All of my courses were asynchronous, so it felt like I was teaching it all to myself”
  - “Trying to teach myself six different classes”
  - “Not having in-class interaction --- personally I am a better learner when in a classroom environment”
- Organization, motivation, and stress
  - “Staying organized with all my online work and finding motivation to complete the work”
  - “Waiting until the last minute to do my work”
- Technology issues
  - “Having internet issues at my apartment complex”
  - “Internet issues and uploading issues”
- Field experiences
  - “Completing a virtual field experience --- did not feel I received the “full” experience one normally gets”
  - “Trying to complete two field experiences along with everything else”
- Balancing educational studies with work and family
  - “Trying to juggle online classes and also support my family”
  - Balancing work with my educational demands”
  - Working, trying to do two field studies along with my other classes, and keeping up with my family. This was the hardest semester I have every endured.”

As an overall assessment of the adolescent development course, all students reported that the class had enabled them to develop a greater understanding of adolescents (100%) and that they had learned effectively through the online instruction (100%). Students commented that they appreciated the course organization, reasonable workload, interesting applications, and timely feedback.

Students also evaluated the adolescent development class by sharing their assessments of the helpfulness of specific course elements. On a 4-point scale, (4=very helpful; 3=helpful; 2=somewhat helpful; and 1=not helpful), students reported the arrangement of the online course in weekly modules as very helpful (average score = 3.86). Other highly rated elements of the online adolescent development course were the following:

- PowerPoints with recorded lectures (3.82)
- Course syllabus and schedule (3.77)
- Weekly instructor notes introducing and explaining the module (3.77)
- Weekly application assignments (3.73)
- Consistent emails from instructor over the semester (3.73)

Less highly rated, but still viewed as quite helpful were the following elements:

- Weekly study guides (3.50)
- Online exams (3.45)
- The Adolescent Analysis project (3.45)

The weekly discussion forums in which students responded to an issue-based prompt and to each other were rated lowest (3.41), although still viewed as helpful.

When asked to share the greatest issue they had with the online instruction in the adolescent development class, students most frequently mentioned technology issues with their internet, forgetting to complete assignments or post to the discussion forum, and just getting used to all their classes being online, making it difficult to keep up with their classwork. When asked what changes could be made to improve the course, half of the students reported that no changes needed to be made. From the other half of students, common suggestions included being able to interact more with classmates, replacing the weekly study guides with quizzes to better prepare for exams, and providing access to the full semester of work so students could complete the course at their own pace.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Some research during the pandemic has indicated that learning at a distance had negative effects on students, making them feel anxious, confused, and nervous (Alomyan, 2021; Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020). However, the students in this adolescent development class seemed to have adjusted well to the restrictions of their pandemic settings as they reported being able to effectively continue with their studies in their present living situations, as well as being satisfied with the various formats in which their online classes were offered. Akther (2013) contends that the use of distance learning requires students to have high levels of autonomy and self-organization, which as predominantly juniors and seniors most of these students possessed. Still, although the students appeared to be navigating the pandemic well, it was important to pay close attention to them as people and not just students and to consider how specific course formats and teaching methods impacted them differently. Learning about students, empathizing with them, and maintaining effective communication are central to inclusive teaching (Dewsbury, 2020), whether or not there is an ongoing pandemic.

Research also suggests that an important instructional element of online distance learning is interaction between instructors and students, as well as among students (Dzakiria et al., 2005; Harris & Martin, 2012). The lack of face-to-face instruction, as well as the heavy workload of online classes can impact students negatively in terms of their attitudes and ability to learn. Several students in the adolescent development class indicated that they learned better in face-to-face settings and missed that interaction with other students; however, they appreciated the instructor notes and videos, as well as discussion forums which enhanced communication between instructor and students, as well as among students.

Technology issues were among the greatest challenges faced by students in this adolescent development class. However, most of these issues appeared to be related to students' specific settings, e.g., lack of or slow internet in their apartment complexes or problems with their personal equipment as opposed to the technology of the class (e.g., accessing the digital text or assignments, viewing videos, and utilizing the discussion forum). Overall, students possessed appropriate technology skills which enabled them to effectively manage their class work, as well as deal with technical difficulties when they arose.

Although in-person classes have returned to Appalachian State University, the adolescent development class is currently offered both in-person and online. Student feedback from this study provided helpful information for online offerings. Given the importance of clear communication and interaction, the inclusion of a welcoming message and video continue to be included at the beginning of the course. In addition, along with the instructor notes for each module, a short video by the instructor has been added to provide a more personal introduction to each module/chapter. As the online class is comprised of several non-traditional students with families and/or full-time jobs, the course maintains its asynchronous format; however, more opportunities for optional online meetings are offered. In addition, each module continues to offer the forum discussion to enable students to respond to relevant issues and each other. Instructor emails are sent routinely to check in with students and provide clarification when questions arise.

The biggest change to the course has been the elimination of the Adolescent Analysis project using adolescent movies and instead returning to the Adolescent Service-Learning project in both the in-person and online formats. With the lifting of restrictions, students once again engage in the 20-hour service-learning project, enabling them to apply course concepts as they work with adolescents at a community agency. Students in the online class complete their service-learning in their home communities if they choose. The inclusion of service-learning in the adolescent development course not only "personalizes" course concepts for students, but also provides valuable service to their communities.

The results from this study have also been used to revise online courses specifically designed for family and consumer sciences education majors. Most of these individuals at Appalachian State University are now distance students from across the state and therefore rarely, if ever, come to campus. They typically complete their general education at their local community colleges and then transfer to the university for their upper-level coursework which is offered online. As these students are often full-time employees with families, the online classes are offered in an asynchronous format. To provide a clearer roadmap for students' completion of the classes, they are now organized into weekly modules as opposed to the former topical format. The inclusion of weekly instructor notes, video introductions to modules, and recorded lectures, along with frequent emails and opportunities for online meetings, provides the "presence" of the instructor and enhances communication. The use of discussion forums encourages dialogue among students. Exams are completed online, and any required field experiences are completed in the students' home communities. As with the adolescent development class, students report increased engagement with the classes, as well as increased satisfaction with instruction.

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#### **Citation**

Lee, C.L. (2024). Students' assessment of an online adolescent development class during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education 41*(1), xx-xx.



