



Beyond Transactional Communication; Fostering Effective Teamwork during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Virtual collaboration and teamwork have long transformed many sectors like business and healthcare, and higher education is no exception. However, unlike many other sectors, literature in higher education has primarily focused on team learning in the online context. Most works center around recommendations for effective technology platforms, training, communication, and assessment measures for matriculated students and researchers (Cleary et al., 2018; Flammia et al., 2016; Hu, 2015), rather than for effective virtual team performance for professional educators (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Drawing on the domains of business, education, and the military, this article examines four key factors for fostering effective virtual teamwork among foreign language (FL) instructors: (a) trust, (b) communication, (c) autonomy, and (d) identity. It also offers implications for teacher trainers and educational leadership for building professional development for successful teamwork in an online teaching environment and post-COVID teaching contexts.

Keywords: virtual teams, online teaching, effective teamwork, teacher training

Introduction

The unexpected and rapid transition to online instruction because of the COVID-19 pandemic required nearly all educators in K–12 and higher education to transition from teaching face-to-face (f2f) to teaching online. Initially, most educators focused on the technological logistics of online teaching and instructional adaptations for the virtual classroom. However, there are other factors that contribute to effective online teaching. Interpersonal dynamics change in the virtual environment (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010) and more so when there is little to no opportunity to establish norms for fostering collegial connections in the online environment (Milman, 2020). Supporting effective instruction and a positive learning environment goes beyond equipping teachers with effective technological and pedagogical tools. It also involves the teacher’s role outside of the classroom, their sense of self, and their affective and personal connection to other colleagues in the virtual environment.

As in-service faculty trainers and a senior program administrator at a foreign language (FL) higher education institute, the authors found early on that there was a missing component in the online teaching environment. Transferring established team interactions to the online context directly did not simply or

immediately produce virtual team success., as highlighted during the process of providing the initial online in-service technology training for faculty to teach virtually. Follow-up needs assessments in the online context and ad hoc faculty feedback sessions also confirmed this.

This article first examines four key factors that foster effective teamwork in the online environment, drawing on literature from business, education, and military and moving beyond group assignment and transactional communication. This article next shares the authors' experiences in developing and delivering online in-service teacher training for successful teamwork. This article closes with implications for teacher trainers and educational leadership for fostering successful teamwork in online and post-pandemic contexts.

Literature Review

Perceptions of Online Instruction and Remote Work

Often the biggest barrier to remote work is the perception that it reduces productivity. Yet many studies have shown that remote work is productive and profitable (Surdoval, 2017), and COVID-19 virtual teaching demonstrated such productivity through its meeting of instructional objectives (Hodges et al., 2020).

Still, remote work does have its challenges, including difficulties with technological savviness, systematic use of online materials, and structured delivery of the curriculum (Ferri et al., 2020). Another challenge is effective communication in the online environment (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010). Communication can appear successful on the surface in that deadlines and tangible goals are met. This type of transactional communication is sustainable in the short term but is detrimental to teamwork in the long term. Success in the virtual environment requires an interactional model of communication, where individuals feel acknowledged and like their voices are heard. Individuals also need to have accountability built around trust, a level of individual autonomy, team identity, and a common purpose. The following highlights these principal factors for team effectiveness, starting with trust, as it is the basis for effective personal interaction. Next, the discussion examines how trust fosters better communication and autonomy within a team. Finally, the discussion addresses the role of team identity and having a common purpose. These four factors are the basis for fostering effective teamwork.

Building Trust: Insight from the Business World

For several decades, companies have established, adapted, and conducted effective operations across local and global contexts. Many employees work remotely, as part of a virtual team. Geographic separation can make it challenging for team members to communicate and collaborate in meeting objectives and deadlines. However, evidence from the business sector suggests that if virtual teams effectively manage themselves, they can outperform teams in f2f office spaces (Surdoval, 2017).

However, soft skills are crucial for such successful collaboration (Larson & Makarius, 2018). Lencioni (2002) outlined common elements that break down teamwork and how organizational practices lead to dysfunction and a lack of productivity. Common struggles are absence of trust, fear of conflict, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. The presence of these four factors in teams often result in individuals avoiding conflict to preserve the status quo, which perpetuates team inefficacy. Lencioni described how a team can appear functional and stable due to a lack of conflict and results produced but be fragile at its core because members lack enough trust to openly address this fragility. The team just limps along without ever being able to take its performance to the next level.

Teams need to understand what fosters effective virtual teamwork. DeRosa and Lepsinger (2010) and Lencioni (2002) also described common pitfalls as a lack of: (a) clear goals, direction or priorities; (b) clear roles among team members, cooperation and trust; (c) and engagement. Team members need to not only have an explicit understanding of responsibilities toward established goals but also exert a cooperative effort to develop a sense of trust. This process is built over time through timely regular communication, where processes and results are the focus in an environment of collective responsibility. In such a situation, individuals feel increased autonomy to carry out their responsibilities and team leaders and/or supervisors have confidence in the team's ability to accomplish objectives.

Building Communication: Insights from the Field of Education

For more than a century, educators have served students remotely, with the first correspondence courses beginning in the late 1800s and running until the mid-1900s (Craig, 2015). Using the postal service, teachers and educational teams communicated among themselves and with students to serve students. Later students received instruction through radio communication services and then television. From 1992, online instruction grew and developed into what we know today.

Regardless of the means of distance instruction, remote teaching requires that communication norms and personal connection among the instructors/learners be established. As discussed above, the field of business also stresses communication norms as essential for building trust in a team. Next, effective communication is crucial for sharing progress, challenges, and personal information. This communication contributes to building team identity. With a collective identity and sense of belonging, more open communication and risk-taking is possible. In this context, team members can reflect on processes and instructional approaches to improve performance.

Building Autonomy: Insight from the Military

The military demonstrates adaptability and responsiveness in its teamwork. McCrystal et al. (2015) share that specialist service members need to know that senior leaders grant them the autonomy to make appropriate decisions on the spot in critical situations. Through building trust in training and operational work, team members learn what is appropriate and necessary for the collective team and their mission objective. Military training does not aim to produce individual warriors of super-strength, but rather to develop exceptional teams that operate like synchronized swimmers.

McCrystal et al. (2015) provide examples of fluid teams working effectively in complex situations: US Navy SEALs in training, at the MV Maersk Alabama ship hijacking, and with the US al Qaeda Task Force. Examples from commercial contexts offered are United Flight 173, the 1978 emergency landing in San Francisco, California, and US Airways Flight 1549, the 2009 emergency landing in the Hudson River, New York.

McCrystal et al. (2015) highlight the value of team identity among professionals operating in such complex environments. For example, three marksmen, physically separated in different locations with no radio/telecommunication chatter and adjusting to the environment of the moving sea, perform uniformly as one. The intricacies of autonomous relationships built on sustained trust are what permit, at least in part, precise teamwork.

The question is how to develop such necessary autonomy but at the same time have an intricate connection as a team. Team members need to understand what builds genuine trust and what impedes it. Team members can break down their individual and collective behaviors into smaller components, including communication and personal interaction, assess as a group which components foster trust and

which impede it, and take steps to eliminate or change behaviors that are impeding the establishment of trust.

Team Identity, Cross Field Insights

Remote work alters employees' communication, emotional investment, and work processes. Kane (2014) and others (Ganesh & Gupta, 2010; Mulki & Jaramillo, 2011) examine communication and interaction within the remote work context. They also look at how the experience of professional isolation functions as an obstacle and can negatively impact communication, engagement, and group identity. Their work increases awareness of remote work's impact on social and professional identities as well as investment in group membership. Building trust in distributed teams requires time and, therefore, demands constant attention to the assessment of team interactions and organizational culture. Team members must have conscious awareness of challenges in virtual collaboration, watch out for factors that deteriorate their team's effective performance, and combat issues through demonstrating accountability, developing interpersonal skills, and retaining effective virtual leadership (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010).

Action Research Study

Study Overview

Early in the transition to online instruction, we, the authors, found that in-service technology training and pedagogy workshops were only part of effective instruction. We identified this through the process of providing online technology training for faculty so they could deliver instruction virtually. Additionally, follow-up needs assessments to support faculty and ad hoc faculty feedback sessions provided additional insight. About three to four months into online teaching, these assessment means showed that successful f2f communication within teaching teams, with supervisors, and in cross-institute task forces did not effectively transfer to the online environment. When collected, the data was not intended to be action research but rather was the product of institutional workshop assessments. We later chose to examine the data to share our experiences, our resolutions to challenges, and the impact of measures implemented for the online teaching and post-COVID contexts.

Teaching Context

The study took place in a language school at a higher education institute with approximately 127 instructors. The teachers worked in set teaching teams of about 4 to 6.

Participants

21 FL instructors participated. The FL teachers in this study had different levels of experience teaching online, including some with none, and possessed varying levels of comfort with communicating through online platforms for team communication, project maintenance, curriculum development, and task-force initiatives.

Data Collection

We used a cyclical reflective practice for designing and delivering online in-service teacher training through formal and informal needs assessments. Nine months of training assessments informed the study. There were three forms of data. The first was informal feedback from faculty as participants in technology training (Appendix A). The second form of input was through a formal survey for teachers that participated in online in-service teacher training workshops during the first three months of online teaching (Appendix B). This information was anonymously collected, documented, and used to develop and deliver subsequent workshops. The third form of input was obtained through the mid- and end-of-

course review sessions for regular FL classes, during which faculty shared their successes and challenges (Appendix C). This information recorded also informed subsequent faculty training.

Data Analysis

Activity theory (Leontiev, 1981) views human activity as complex and socially situated phenomena and examines the mediation of human interactions. It serves as a descriptive framework for taking the environment, individual experience, culture, and motivation into account. A benefit of this theory is that it understands that individuals exist within the social reality, and it serves to identify patterns and make inferences regarding interactions. An activity is seen as a system of human interaction, where subjects work on an object in order to reach an outcome using a tool.

In this study, teachers were understood as the subjects that delivered the language curriculum (an object) in the online context (an outcome) via the instructional platform (a tool). Therefore, we analyzed the data by viewing each teaching team as a system itself and as one that interacted with other systems at the institute, thus taking into account the school context, participants' experience, and teaching teams' practices. The goal was to identify and understand patterns among the challenges reported by participants in the online environment to implement changes to in-service teacher training workshops to foster effective teamwork.

Results

Trends Identified

The data revealed five themes: (a) lack of instructional awareness in the online environment as participants focused on technology use, (b) lost sense of identity as a teaching team; (c) unfamiliarity with mechanisms for effective online communication; (d) manifestation of emotional well-being concerns due to a merger of work and home spaces; and (e) development of screen fatigue due to teaching load and frequent meetings.

At the onset of the pandemic, we concentrated in-service training on developing technological skills to deliver instruction and assessment effectively online from home. The data showed we overlooked training to support effective team communication and develop trust, which permits the establishment of a team identity with members who possess individual autonomy as well as a collective sense of responsibility.

We categorized the five factors above into three topic areas to inform subsequent workshop design and delivery. First, we grouped a lack of instructional awareness, emotional well-being concerns, and screen fatigue as a need area: fostering *Mindfulness and Well-Being*. Next, we grouped a lost sense of team and unfamiliarity with mechanisms for effective online communication as a need area: developing better awareness of what a *Team and Teaming* are. Third, we also re-grouped unfamiliarity with mechanisms for effective online communication with screen fatigue as a need area: fostering *Components of Effective Virtual Communication and Meetings*.

We piloted in-service training workshops designed based on the three need areas to support faculty. After implementation of these trainings, we conducted follow-up assessments that showed their successful impact on teacher team interaction. We describe the workshops below.

In-Service Training Delivered Based on the Trends Identified

Mindfulness and Well-Being

The first workshop we developed addressed participants' inattentiveness to the importance of self-awareness for avoiding emotional stressors and screen fatigue. Participants were forced into a hasty transition to work from home and bombarded with numerous new means for delivering lessons and communicating with colleagues. Accordingly, they expressed having little self-awareness while working and focused on immediately tangible tasks. To address this gap, we offered an interactive workshop based on the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) that addressed mindfulness with the goals of raising teachers' self-awareness of what stressors they were experiencing, providing means to address these stressors, and explaining the impact of stressors. The workshop provided attendees with tools, online resources, and suggestions to keep themselves present in the moment, monitor themselves throughout the workday, and address challenges at home through mindfulness.

We divided the learning process into four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The concrete experience stage provided attendees with opportunities to describe the situations and stressors they faced followed by a reflective stage where they shared and discussed how their stressors impacted them both in the workplace and at home so they could identify similarities among themselves. The workshop facilitators guided the abstract conceptualization of these factors and experiences and drew connections between theories on mindfulness and well-being and the experiences attendees described. The last stage of the learning process presented activities for attendees to use to apply mindfulness and well-being principles to their daily routines.

Team and Teaming

Teachers were familiar with teamwork, but not in the virtual environment. So, in addition to reviewing the factors for effective teamwork and the elements that break down team effectiveness (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Lencioni, 2002), participants explored the concept of *teaming* (Edmondson, 2016). *Teaming* is teamwork on the fly that involves coordinating and collaborating without the limitations of a fixed team because of a need to accomplish unexpected tasks. *Teaming* was very relevant throughout the pandemic as the instructional contexts were in continual flux and staffing resources frequently changed. Teachers found themselves needing to know how to manage unfamiliar interpersonal dynamics and negotiation processes to perform effectively.

Following a similar structure, the teamwork and *teaming* workshop first introduced the components of effective teamwork and the concept of *teaming*. Its objective was to stress the effectiveness of integrating *teaming* into teamwork. Attendees explored examples of *teaming* across different professions and *teaming's* application in higher education through video snippets, followed by participants' sharing of their personal experiences. The session closed with suggestions on how participants can (a) integrate the principles of teamwork and *teaming* into routinely performed interactions; (b) implement *teaming* as a communication means when facing unexpected situations; and (c) highlight that teamwork and *teaming* are two ingredients integral for productive teamwork.

Components of Effective Virtual Communication and Meetings

The workshop utilized adaptations from Ozenc and Fajardo's (2021) handbook on creative ways to run effective virtual meetings to strengthen interpersonal connections, which provided mechanisms for building rapport in the online environment and principles for effective teamwork in the virtual setting

(DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010; Lencioni, 2002). The workshop again utilized experiential learning activities, where attendees had opportunities to reflect on their own experiences while considering factors that broke down effective communication in the virtual setting. Attendees watched video snippets on how to avoid communication breakdown and then shared possible solutions to their shared communication breakdowns. They then selected sample rituals and practices from Ozenc and Fajardo (2021) to improve virtual communication and meetings and shared the rationale for their choices in small groups. Lastly, attendees described how the selected sample ritual and practices could positively impact their teaching team communication in *teaming* situations.

Impact of In-Service Training Delivered

The following discussion shares the outcome of delivering the two workshops described above over several iterations to achieve the training of nearly all the faculty at the school. Again, this was within an institutional practice of formally following up on the impact of training offered. The following section described the outcome of the new training addressing trust, communication, autonomy, and team identity.

Teamwork, Teaming, and Trust

Teachers familiar with performing effectively in intact teams had to come to terms with the dynamic nature of *teaming*, where unique and unpredictable changes in temporary and ad hoc team formations became the norm. Participants stated that the workshop content was beneficial. We understood that the workshop on mindfulness played a role in the effectiveness of teamwork and *teaming* (developing trust). For example, the practice of dividing tasks according to individuals' various skill strengths required team members to have confidence in the others' abilities to deliver a well-prepared lesson for which they too would be responsible. By working according to individuals' points of strength each team member was alleviated of the burden of being individually responsible for all of their class preparation, course material development, student tracking, and administrative matters.

Trust and Communication

The mutual trust within the teaching team and the school community facilitated better communication in that individuals were able to set norms more confidently for their virtual meetings and agree on which communication means were appropriate for which functions as well as ways to use them so as to avoid unnecessary and overwhelming email trails. For example, formal meetings became less rigid and allowed for the human touch to kick in. Mid-level leadership and faculty members could have some out-of-the-box exchanges when checking each other's wellbeing and break out of the rigidity of a bullet point agenda, often executed at a bullet-paced speed. Therefore, over time, an environment of collaboration, trust, and well-coordinated communication was created.

Communication, Trust, and Team Identity

With a more conducive and productive working environment, teachers had the ability to experiment and diversify their professional interactions and teaching responsibilities in the virtual environment. Their instructional practice became more dynamic, as they felt trusted and autonomous in the instructional process. They communicated and coordinated with other team members with less fear of being judged or criticized since some of their job responsibilities were distributed based on their specific strengths and support. Trust, communication, and autonomy were three factors that were produced through participation in the workshops offered, and they fostered the needed fourth component: group identity. Group identity is a critical factor for meaningful interaction, with each stakeholder's commitment becoming a default, which fosters team success. However, team identity is not built from a few training

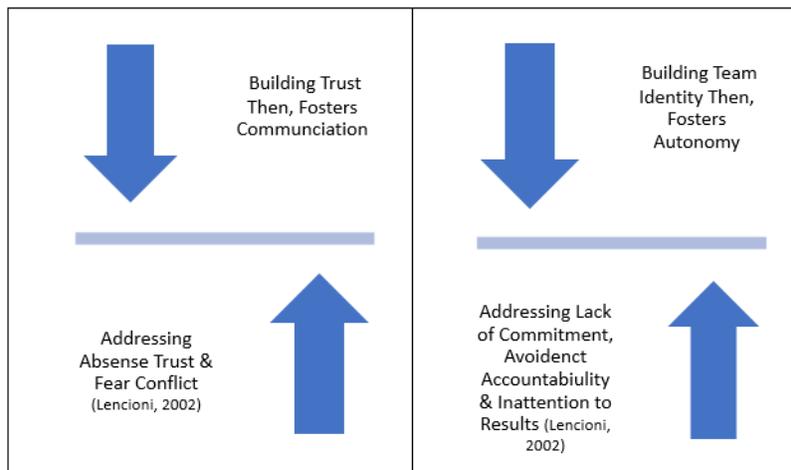
workshops alone and needs to be fostered through ongoing engagement of individual members and group accountability.

Significance

Participants more easily established foundations for better communication after these workshops because the workshops addressed how to foster trust explicitly. Therefore, participants better addressed the fear of conflict and factors that break down trust (Lencioni, 2002). Participants increased the level of effective communication across personal and professional communication in accomplishing tasks. This impact is depicted on the left side of Figure 1 below. Through fostering trust came better communication, which in turn resulted in better collaboration and formation of a team identity. Once there was a team identity, the trust established permitted more autonomy among team members. As result of an effective team identity, even with members operating autonomously, a lack of commitment and avoidance of accountability for team results was eliminated.

Figure 1

Team Interaction Intersection Workshop Development Focus Areas for the Virtual Environment



Discussion and Implications

The following section offers implications for teacher trainers and senior academic leadership.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Don't Pack Too Much Into the Workshop

Any training that attempts to address too many theoretical factors runs the risk of overwhelming participants with little opportunity to reflect on individual application. The length of the training is not so much the question as the time dedicated to allow participants to reflect on personal applications and internalization of the training content.

The training on teamwork in the virtual setting addressed three factors: trust, communication, and autonomy, with a fourth incorporated throughout all training as an overarching theme: team identity. As a result of explicitly addressing these four factors, there was synergy among these factors over time.

Trust and a Common Purpose Need to Be Incorporated Into Workshop Design

Trust and a common purpose are not topics to be discussed solely in a workshop. Building awareness and providing interaction in a training space will align the team's purpose temporarily but will not achieve the necessary long-term interaction practices needed for effective teamwork. There needs to be an institutional culture, at a minimum at a department level, that cultivates empowerment and shared team consciousness.

Mutually exclusive and collectively exhausted (MECE) models (Chevallier, 2016) reflect the traditional organizational chart and place each division and its members into neatly separate categories that do not overlap. This is an accessible way of representing institute operations, but it is not usually an effective way to understand employees' functions (McCrystal et al., 2015). People's job functions often overlap or at times intersect. This was common at our institute and is increasingly more so in response to the impact of teaching in the virtual environment. A shared consciousness of goals and commitment to them and the empowered ability to act outside a central authority were essential for harnessing the power of teamwork (McCrystal et al., 2015).

21 teachers possessed the ability to make decisions within their team and reach out beyond those team borders to interact with other needed divisions without going through the department chair. This produced efficiency in addressing challenges and generated interdependency between the team and other teams and divisions. This adaptability empowered teachers to possess autonomy yet work collectively. This, in turn, fostered a strengthened team identity. Institutional culture plays a significant role in the effective larger operations of teams.

Therefore, the recommendation is for teacher trainers and senior academic leadership to consider how institutional culture promotes or inhibits teamwork beyond the team itself. These stakeholders can then work together to foster specific institute practices for cross-collaboration without mandated supervisory authorization. This will increase each teacher's responsibility and ability to better utilize teamwork training, take risks in the work environment, and reflect on the outcomes of external resources used.

The Work Doesn't Stop in the New Normal

With their research on teamwork from military and business contexts, McCrystal et al. (2015) remind us that technology is the source of our challenges and the solutions for our success. Their's observations are also widely acknowledged in the field of education. McCrystal et al. (2015) specifically speak to teamwork and organizational culture, not just individual team interaction. Although technology can generate problems, at the same time it permits solutions to obstacles; "it was the culture change in the organization that allowed the [team] to use it properly" (McCrystal et al., 2015, p. 251).

The personal and professional journeys of the participants in the study have highlighted the participants' adaptability both because of their professionalism and commitment to their students and because they belonged to an institute with a culture of managerial openness. They possessed control over designs with respect to student instruction outside of the teaching team. They also operated at times within strict formalized, centralized domains of communication and interaction when submitting semester grade reports and ensuring testing integrity processes. Both were essential for the team success and the students' success.

While providing faculty with what they needed for effective communication, teachers foresaw potential future challenges and began to identify possible solutions. The pandemic as we knew it in 2020

has ended, and it changed the way we “do school” (Lichtman, 2020). However, we recommend avoiding an attempt to return to the prior ‘normal’ regarding teacher training goals. Instructional methods and effective use of new technologies will always be relevant, but listening to teachers, as was done during the pandemic, will direct how to best serve them post-pandemic.

Conclusion

The move to online instruction changed the nature of teaching rapidly and dramatically in the spring of 2020 and has formed a new paradigm for education. We found it more critical than ever in 2020 to dedicate time to assessing and discussing fundamental questions related to what we do as educators beyond the classroom and how, collectively, as a team, educators worked to accomplish effective teamwork in the virtual environment. This study has provided insights into effective teamwork during the pandemic, but as we are now in 2023 where many educators may be continuing to work in hybrid contexts with some instructors working remotely online and others in person, it would be beneficial for additional studies to explore teamwork in these contexts.

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Appendix A

Feedback from Faculty as Participants in In-Service Training

Evaluation

[Workshop Title, as appropriate]

[Date, as appropriate]

Facilitators: Kara Mac Donald & Mirna Khater

We hope your experience was both positive and rewarding. We are constantly looking for ways to improve our workshop and we value your feedback.

Content Rating

Please rate the value and applicability of the topics covered on a scale of 1–5.

1=low value/not applicable – 5=high value/very applicable

1 2 3 4 5

Why was the content valuable/not valuable?
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Training Methods Rating

Please rate the effectiveness of the training methods (i.e., session structure, activities, methodology) used on a scale of 1–5.

1=low value/not applicable – 5=high value/very applicable

1 2 3 4 5

Why were these training methods valuable/not valuable?
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Most Valuable Aspect of the Training

What was the most valuable aspect of the training? Why?

Least Influential Aspect of the Training

What was the least influential aspect of the training? Why?

Unaddressed Elements by this Workshop for the Virtual Context

What elements of your experience teaching in the virtual context are struggles that have not been fully addressed by this workshop?

Appendix B

Faculty Virtual Needs Assessment After Three Months of Virtual Instruction

Virtual Telework Email Survey

Mirna Khater & Kara Mac Donald

We hope your experience was both positive and rewarding. We are constantly looking for ways to improve our faculty support and workshop and we value your feedback.

- a. **Did you face any personal or interpersonal problems?**
- b. **What kind of emotions did you (teachers/students) experience?**
- c. **Can you share any lessons learned?**
- d. **What are your recommendations for a productive/hassle-free virtual environment?**

Sent via email so recipients the 21 teachers in the study were able to share as much as they wished.

Appendix C

Informal Input Feedback Session and Ad Hoc Personal Experiences

The following forms of input occurred organically as part of delivering in-service training during the early stages of the pandemic and were record first informally and then formally:

- **Workshop Tangential Comments**, both through verbal input and chat comments, from participants while conducting workshops;
- **Workshop Side Bars**, during break out and full group in-workshop sessions;
- **Workshop On-Break Discussions**, where participants shared experiences/struggles with facilitators during workshop downtime; and
- **Hallway and Watercooler Sharing and Venting Opportunities**, outside of workshop delivery, where there was formal and informal collegial interaction among the authors and the focus group participants in the virtual environment outside of formal venues.