

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AMID DISRUPTION: NORWICH UNIVERSITY'S HONORS PROGRAM AND THE INTERNATIONAL SPY MUSEUM PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This article incorporates a case-study approach that examines how faculty and students in a first-year honors seminar at Norwich University navigated the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis. It delineates the revision of an undergraduate research project in partnership with the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC. The authors describe steps professors and students took to ensure successful collaboration and completion of this project, including assignment modifications, the development of a collaborative virtual learning process, assessment of project management, and tools and research strategies employed. Student reflections and pedagogical measures support the challenges and solutions outlined. The article concludes with recommended course design measures to ensure consistent learning outcomes that support positive and productive research and teaching experiences amid programmatic disruption.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped how we live, work, and interact. Publications ranging from *The New York Times* to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* found that the global pandemic is poised to become “the single most disruptive event in American higher education in at least a half-century” (Desai, 2020). This article addresses Norwich University’s (NU) challenges in the pivot to online learning due to COVID-19 in our Honors Program seminar “The Other Side of Innovation.” The article explores pedagogical strategies that emerged from revising the final project, a collaborative assignment. Combining research and experiential learning designed in partnership with the International Spy Museum (ISM) in Washington, DC, produced the learning outcomes achieved despite the obstacles and disruptions of the pandemic.

Norwich University is a private senior military college accredited by the New England Commission of Higher Education and located in the Northeast Census Bureau Region (Division 1: New England). NU’s undergraduate population is approximately 2,600, with an online student population of over 1,400 in the College of Graduate and Continuing Studies. The Honors Program is an undergraduate program with an enrollment of approximately 100 students across academic disciplines. Experiential learning is not a requirement at NU. However, the Honors

Program requires that students engage in “a hands-on experiential learning process that demands asking questions, conceiving ideas, creating an execution plan, and acting on it” (Norwich University, n.d.).

The Other Side of Innovation” is a team-taught seminar that utilizes high-impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008) for first-year experiences, collaborative projects, and undergraduate research to cultivate a problem-based, team-centered learning environment. In spring 2020, nine students were enrolled in the course from various academic majors, including criminal justice, engineering, nursing, computer science, and political science, allowing for interdisciplinary engagement in an intimate class setting. The authors identified the ISM as a promising academic partner because of its educational focus on the course theme of surveillance and its commitment to experiential learning. The authors reached out to the ISM’s executive director, a NU alum. They pitched a collaborative research project where students would design an interactive teaching guide focused on the future of innovation, integrating the educational materials available on the ISM’s website. At the end of the semester, students present their teaching guides to the ISM team in a live presentation on NU’s campus with members of the administration and faculty in attendance. The presentations enable our students to network with ISM executives, increase the visibility of the project, and develop their public speaking skills.

Experiential learning theory informed the scaffolded experiential-learning plan for this project (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). To enhance the experience, students would travel to ISM, conduct on-site research, and gain a firsthand understanding of the institution’s mission and materials. Because the project objectives aligned with several of NU’s strategic goals, including promoting experiential teaching and learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, and inclusive leadership opportunities for all students, the university provided a grant to fund this excursion. However, when COVID-19 emerged, everything went virtual, forcing the authors to rethink the project and its outcomes.

The authors made three significant changes to support students moving forward with experiential learning in a virtual environment: reducing assignments to prioritize the final project, becoming project coaches, and mentoring students to emphasize process and collaboration over content management. Additionally, the authors designed a virtual tour of the ISM from photos taken from previous visits to the museum and published a list of additional resources and videos for students to consult, including museum artifacts and visitor experiences. The final revision to the project was the format of the final presentation. Instead of holding an on-campus event with guests from the Norwich community, the students pitched their teaching guide virtually to the ISM executive director and youth education director.

COURSE ASSESSMENT AND ANALYSIS

The assessment was derived from student progress reports, comments from ISM executives, and course evaluations (Table 1). These feedback measures enabled the authors to quantify effectiveness in three main categories: communication, problem-solving, and course management, using a Likert scale, with “5” representing very satisfied and “1” being very dissatisfied. Communication was maximized across all course levels to compensate for the

pandemic-induced disruption. Student responses focused on five dimensions: expectations, empathy, methodologies, flexibility, and feedback.

Student experience in this course was ranked higher in all categories than in each area’s institutional average. The results indicate that the pedagogical methods applied during the disruption were effective, particularly those with no standard deviation. The goal of completing an ambitious project during a major disruption with unknowns for both instructors and students made the course project a problem-based learning exercise for us all. The turmoil created a unique situation in which students and instructors had to face uncertainty, trust each other, and take risks to be successful in this challenging new environment.

Table 1. Pedagogical Effectiveness

Evaluation Category	Question	Course Average	Institution-Wide Average	Course Standard Deviation
Communication (Expectation)	Course objectives and requirements were clearly explained	4.80	4.59	0.88
Course Management	Class time was used effectively.	5.00	4.51	0
Communication (Empathy)	The instructors knew when students did not understand the material.	4.80	4.31	0.45
Problem Solving (Independence)	Students were encouraged to think for themselves.	5.00	4.65	0
Course Management (Comprehension)	Assignments assisted students in learning the material.	5.00	4.54	0
Communication (Methodologies)	Effective examples and illustrations were used	5.00	4.65	0
Communication (Flexibility)	Instructors were approachable outside of class	5.00	4.57	0
Problem Solving (Challenge)	The course challenged you to do your best work	4.80	4.32	0.45
Communication (Feedback)	Instructors listened to students’ questions and opinions.	4.80	4.66	0.45

Both student teams produced excellent projects that impressed the instructors and the executives at the Spy Museum. Using a rubric to evaluate the student presentations, ISM executives scored one team at 95% and the other at 93%. An ISM executive made the following statement:

The Honors group hit their mark and their deadline. They overcame time and space constraints to succeed. In a remarkable compressed time-period, the students on this project, as a team, accomplished much. That kind of work is hard to replicate,

so the earlier individuals face those kinds of pressures, the better (they) will be prepared...in a work environment. ... I thought these products were excellent. I liked both of the products, and the students should be proud of themselves. (Personal communication, April 30, 2020)

Another ISM executive remarked to our students in the debrief after their presentations: “We were impressed with all of you. Your presentations were both very strong with very impressive graphics and impressive effort” (personal communication, April 30, 2020).

In the end, the project met the original learning objectives established before the pivot. The students produced strong and creative products that impressed their clients and instructors. They effectively navigated disruption through collaboration and communication across time and space.

Looking Back to Look Ahead

Fuse et al. (2020) identified several barriers to successful research collaborations in virtual learning environments during the COVID-19 pandemic: decreases in group communications, opportunities to teach by example within lab settings, and opportunities for student presentation skill development. The authors encountered these obstacles during the shift to online teaching. The project revisions required attention to the various disruptions brought on by the pandemic, from the logistical (physical separation, internet access) to the psychological (isolation, loss, anxiety about the future). An overview of the course revisions is provided in Table 2, broken down by identified disruption domains (column 1), the confronted challenges (column 2), and proposed solutions for future course iterations (column 3) across each domain.

This experience will inform future experiential learning projects to allow for reflection and adaptation. Including these competencies in the original course design would have been impossible as the pandemic disruption made new competencies necessary. The authors plan to include the lessons learned through this experience in future course development, incorporating flexibility and increased engagement across multiple modalities to allow for better communication, collaboration, and clarity, in-person or virtually.

Table 2. Disruption Domains and Solutions

Disruption Domain	Challenges	Solutions and Future Plans
Logistical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical separation of students and faculty • Divergent time zones for students and faculty • Changes to the student work environment • Limited access to the internet and course materials for some students • Experiential learning and research trip to DC canceled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and work across time zones. • Maintain weekly synchronous virtual meetings, recorded for all access. • Create a virtual ISM visitor experience.
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown student well-being • Quarantining and remote learning produced a sense of isolation • Personal, financial, and social concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain regular synchronous meetings • Students should submit reflections on their new learning environments
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition from highly personal to distance learning • Transition from interactive in-person discussions to virtual exchange across different platforms • Divergent time zones and schedules for group meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students work & communicate in virtual teams, and meet with instructors regularly • Prioritize the construction of a virtual community that reflects our in-person classroom.
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course syllabus and objectives were not designed for remote teaching and learning • Transition from traditional in-person classroom to virtual • Competing student and faculty priorities between home and school responsibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise course syllabus to prioritize effective virtual assignments • Increase the level of instruction was to assignment guidelines • Emphasize flexibility and conduct regular check-ins with individual students and teams
Technical Competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfamiliar learning platforms were required at the university level • Unfamiliarity with virtual collaboration strategies and platforms • Lack of training and/or familiarity with online teaching and learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide pedagogical training for faculty • Provide virtual reference materials to students • Instructors facilitate and model online collaboration strategies.
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty roles needed to be adjusted to suit the virtual environment • Student roles and leadership positions needed to be established within the classroom and their teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty took a “coaching” approach to mentor project teams over individuals • Guidance was provided for students to delineate team roles and designate responsibilities

CONCLUSION

The ongoing effects of the global pandemic and other intersecting current forces of political, social, and economic unrest have made “teaching through disruptions” a reality for all instructors. Karalis and Raikou (2020) argued that “the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic ... can serve as a good reason for the renewal and development of teaching and learning in the university context.” (p. 492) As scholarship on higher education’s response to the COVID-19 crisis is beginning to show, it requires more empathy, flexibility, and creativity to teach and learn through disruption (Field, 2020). As we identify new domains of the disruptions caused by COVID-19, a new body of pedagogical scholarship can emerge that enables us to examine the effects of disruption and identify faculty resources and training to mitigate negative impacts. While the pandemic is still very real, we have started to share ideas about how higher education institutions can demonstrate pedagogical resilience, increasing the likelihood of success through proper planning and support. The case study presented in this article is just one instance of faculty and student resilience that occurred in the spring of 2020. The authors look forward to conversations with colleagues about disruption to ensure best practices and student success.

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