Suggestions for Improving Mid-Pandemic Online Psychoanalytic Education

The uncomfortable reality is that psychoanalytic education will have to be online during the Fall, and probably Spring, semesters because of the Covid-19 surge. Nearly all institutes and programs will be teaching online. No one is exempt and no one asked for this.

APsaA’s Covid-19 Advisory Team has been working with the Study Group on Distance Education to develop resources to help psychoanalytic educators adapt to these distressing times. We’ve worked together to create this list of suggestions, guidelines, and practices that can be implemented to accentuate the possibilities of online learning while attenuating the losses. But we also want to hear from you. We’ve set up a web-form at https://forms.gle/TaETx9mUdcaugSGg8 where you can send us practices and suggestions you are finding useful. Please let us know what’s working, and what’s not.

Bringing entire programs online in response to a global pandemic is without precedent. Much will be the same and much will be different. We’re all trying to figure this out as we go along. But we can learn from the first few months of the pandemic and from the previous experience of educators and candidates who have been working in mixed online and onsite classes and programs. The following suggestions come from those experiences, including a series of listening sessions the Study Group conducted this summer with candidates about their experiences with online psychoanalytic education.

What follows is not intended to be a best practices model for online psychoanalytic education. Instead, they are things we can all do right now to make a bad situation incrementally better. There are 5 sections:

— Fundamentals of Online Education
— Technology
— Dimensions of Community and Psychoanalytic Identity
— Classroom Factors
— Online Supervision
Fundamentals of Online Education

— As a general orienting principle for online education, the more opportunities for interaction and the more channels of information the better. Try to use as many technology tools as possible to enrich the learning environment to compensate for losing the intimacy of the in-room experience.

— A common enrichment technique in online learning environments is supplementing synchronous experiences (like a Zoom class when everyone is online at the same time) with asynchronous opportunities to interact and learn (everyone is online at different times like a web-forum or discussion board).

— Instructors and administrators should attend to online group dynamics. These are both unique and easy to overlook. Some participants may primarily be affected by online disinhibition and participate more freely and actively, and perhaps sometimes inappropriately, while others will respond to the loss of social facilitation and containment by withdrawing and becoming less active. Many will just be exactly who they are in the room. Plus, issues around competition, between students and between students and teachers, will likely emerge. Instructors should try to attend to these online classroom dynamics to help the timid be comfortable enough to participate while modulating the overly bold. Statements like “let’s try to hear from those who have so far been quiet” are useful.

— Online learning works best when done “with” students and not “to” them. One way to intentionally create a collaborative learning community is by engaging candidates/students in a dialogue about expectations for a class or seminar. This can be done in one-on-one meetings, in the class itself, or both.

— Institutes should both promote an appreciation of the opportunities online learning presents and, simultaneously, acknowledge the losses and difficulties everyone is experiencing because the pandemic requires this move from onsite to online learning.
Technology

— Set up a technology “help desk” for candidates, students, faculty, and supervisors. Have set days and times for when this technology support is available. Provide weekly reminders of the times when the “help desk” will be open. In addition, prepare for emergent problems by having a technology consultant available who is familiar with the institute’s setup.

— Help students and faculty develop necessary skills with the specific technology platform being used. For example, zoom.com has online tutorials that can be studied together as a group. Consider having knowledgeable members of the community create short instructional videos showing the basics of zoom use for classes. Examples of specific skills that are easily taught should include mute/unmute; video on/off; how to use chat; how to customize settings to include name and picture; speaker vs gallery view; how to share screen; how to record and prevent recording; using white boards; and understanding break-out groups. For an example see the useful materials recently put online by the Columbia Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research at www.psychoanalysis.columbia.edu/covid-19/remote-teaching-tips-instructors.

— However tempting, try to avoid making assumptions about people’s relationship with technology. Remember that skills, access to, comfort with, and feelings about technology are not tied to demographics like race, privilege, or age. Consider a survey at the beginning of the academic year to assess the quality of faculty and student access to technology, and their level of proficiency and comfort using the specific technologies to be used. Once areas requiring remediation become apparent, take steps to provide specific instruction.

— Provide a platform for informal, asynchronous contact within a class/seminar and for the learning community as a whole. Keep in mind that everyone’s familiarity with different technology platforms varies. And typically there is a trade-off between the familiarity of a tool and how feature-rich and efficient it is. For example, email is familiar to all. However, email is also a very clumsy, non-specific way for a group of people to have
an informal group discussion. For some groups the familiar will be better. For other groups the added features and richer experience will make the learning curve worthwhile, especially over the long-term. Here are some examples of this trade-off to consider. All the platforms mentioned are either free or have a useable free option.

— Familiar email-based approaches: listservs or google groups or even just Cc: lists with “reply-all.”
— Familiar web-based approaches: private Facebook groups; a collaborative Google doc (instructors can use this tool to pose questions that students then respond to between meetings, best to have one question per document).
— Feature rich but unfamiliar apps: slack.com or discord.com for classes and groups to communicate easily; perusall.com for collaborative reading and learning.

Dimensions of Community and Psychoanalytic Identity:

— Providing a technological platform for informal online interaction within members of a class and between instructors and candidates/students is not enough. It is also important initially to encourage and support wide use of the new opportunities for interaction.

— Be positive about the value of what’s being offered online. Learning communities need to hear that difference can be made to work.

— Encourage the learning community to recognize and engage loss and mourning in regard to the pandemic, to changes in practice patterns, and to the absence of in-room intimacy. Try to be attentive to fears about the future of analysis, especially from candidates/students. Providing context to these fears by referring to psychoanalytic history can help. After all, let’s remember that psychoanalysis has survived and even thrived in the midst of much historical upheaval. If we work together we will continue to survive and thrive.

— Provide ways to discuss all the unique ways that the psychoanalytic community is helping individuals and communities understand and manage the pandemic.
— Informal social time is important for all members of a learning community. Both students and faculty will miss this contact with the switch to all online teaching. One suggestion is to offer informal times that faculty, either singly or as a group, can be available to students and candidates for something like an online coffee hour or a zoom wine & cheese reception. Unlike faculty “office hours” specific to a class or purpose, this would just be a chance to spend together informally as a community. Be prepared to attend to online group dynamics in these informal gatherings as well so that no person or group monopolizes the conversation. Listen carefully to students’ voices so all will feel included.

— Encourage special attention to self-care among faculty and students.

**Classroom Factors**

— Teachers should hold online "office hours" at the start of a course so they can meet 1-on-1 with each student in the class to enrich the personal connections. Additional office hours can help make up for the lack of ‘coffee breaks’ and other social gatherings during which students could have approached faculty for valuable informal contact.

— Classes are just for the members of the class. As much as possible students and instructors should respect everyone’s privacy. While some interruptions by family, pets, and household responsibilities are inevitable, everyone should strive to attend class with the same level of privacy as is used for one’s clinical work. Teachers should clearly communicate expectations for the optimal maintenance of the teaching frame and provide reminders throughout the course.

— Teaching is still teaching, whether onsite or online. Challenges, often requiring timely attention, will arise. While working online makes it easier to ignore problems, it’s still important to problem-solve collaboratively with the student or students rather than imposing a “solution” on the group or on an individual student.

— Feedback from candidates and students working online about how things are going can help avoid many problems. Create and use channels for rapid feedback about the online instructional experience and
environment to give candidates and students a way to communicate their concerns and enrich their experience.

— All online class/seminar participants share some responsibility for protecting the learning environment. So, everyone who is not speaking or engaged in an active discussion should be on mute to avoid unintended interruptions. Unmute when speaking. Students should be attentive and participate. They should not read email or texts or turn off their cameras and disappear from the zoom room unless it is necessary to conserve bandwidth (a subsequent mailing will detail other aspects of proper classroom “netiquette”).

— When using the Zoom chat function during a class ALWAYS pay special attention to the addressee. Nothing derails a dynamic more than a private message sloppily sent to “Everyone.” Consider the advantages and disadvantages of the chat function for the dynamics of each specific group. Teachers or the group as a whole should decide about whether and how to use Chat.

— Teachers should pay special attention to different levels of comfort with Zoom and with participating online. Reading interpersonal cues online is different than in-person interactions. Anticipate that students might initially be reluctant to participate or might unintentionally interrupt each other during a discussion. However groups do tend to find a flow. Reassure students and teachers that class cohesion will develop over time.

— Use teaching techniques that call for greater candidate/student participation, including pre-recording lectures or PowerPoint study guides to the readings. Ideally, content knowledge should be acquired by students outside the classroom by, for example, reading the assigned readings or viewing the pre-recorded lecture or PowerPoint. Some students have complained that some instructors simply read a lecture. Students experience this as poor teaching and a waste of class time. The online classroom space is ideally used for further discussion and exploration of content.

— Develop the procedures and know-how to insure that any clinically confidential material shared as part of a case conference or seminar is
done with both the necessary technical protections (passwords and encryption) and the appropriate agreements (including that all possess requisite know-how, will destroy all digital and paper copies, and will not copy or distribute). Using the “share screen” function in Zoom is a useful way to share such material without it having to be distributed and then deleted.

— Teachers should recognize that people will be connecting from different locations, and correspondingly often at different times during their day. Different locations will be experiencing different degrees of pandemic activity. Also, other localized tragedies and traumas specific to some students and not others should be noted.

— Programs should consider making use of unique opportunities online education presents. These include online lectures, or even full seminars and classes, presented by guest experts from other locations. To manage work-load, institutes might consider teacher “swapping” allowing students access to a wider range of expertise without burdening the work-load of any one teacher.

— There is much less immediate feedback available to teachers in an online class making it harder to “read the room.” Therefore, special attention should be paid to understanding the level of student engagement with the seminar/class. A simple way of doing this is to frequently ask some version of: “it would be helpful if you could each tell me what is working for you in this class and what is not.” Students could be invited to send you this feedback in an email.

— Students should be explicitly encouraged to use the platform employed for between class interaction for brainstorming, reacting to content from class or from readings, asking questions for later consideration by class or group, and responding to the readings and prepared lectures.

— Teachers can comfort themselves with the reality that being forced online is a new way of working, and it is difficult. Students may be more comfortable with online learning than teachers, especially initially. Whatever suggestions teachers want to implement to achieve their ideal, the reality of education is that seminars and classes are always messy. While striving for
one’s ideal is good practice, keep in mind that classrooms are messy, evolving spaces in which being a “good enough teacher” is both the most common reality and a level of pedagogical achievement that is truly good enough.

**Online Supervision**

— Supervisors vary in their level of comfort and expertise supervising online. Consider creating opportunities for supervisor instruction and support because experience providing online supervision can vary widely.

— With control/training cases starting as well as continuing online, supervisors may have to first work with supervisees to make sure they have the requisite technological skills to properly utilize whatever platform they are using for analytic work.

— Provide specific instruction, perhaps with a webinar or online video, of what makes teleanalysis and teletherapy work and what makes it both the same and different. Open the supervision space to conversations about the challenges of conducting teleanalysis and teletherapy. One possibility some are finding useful is for supervisors to share with candidates their own path to learning about conducting teleanalysis and teletherapy.

— Consider that some candidates might be missing many of the special rituals that evolve in the relationship between supervisor and candidate, such as talking a walk together or sharing a cup of coffee or a chocolate. Supervisors also should be attentive to their own losses and responsive to expressions of loss by candidates.

— Be aware that some candidates might feel anxious that their clinical hours “won’t count” towards graduation due to the pandemic-induced need to work online with patients. Familiarize yourself with your institute’s policies and those of relevant organizations so that you can address those fears directly and provide candidates with clear guidance. Being a candidate is hard. Being a candidate during the pandemic is harder. Ambiguity about training requirements yields unnecessary stress that is easily removed.
Finally, a reminder to go to our web-form at https://forms.gle/TaETx9mUdcaugSGg8 where you can send us practices and suggestions you are finding useful we can share with others.

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