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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on adult education programs throughout the world, abruptly transforming in-person instruction to distance teaching/learning. Can the lessons learned from adult students, especially related to the “digital divide,” be leveraged to enhance adult education and create more inclusive policies and practices moving forward? To grapple with this question, this exploratory qualitative study sought the insights of adult learners in the northeastern United States through an online survey of primarily open-ended questions. Through multiple rounds of coding using a trauma-informed lens, the following themes emerged: (1) anxiety and loss; (2) distractions, adjustments, and balance; and (3) distance learning and its advantages and disadvantages. Recommendations for modifying preservice preparation and ongoing professional development for educators of adults were asserted. These recommendations focused globally on addressing adult students’ needs for ongoing academic and psycho-social-emotional support to enhance their digital literacy and educational outcomes. Limitations of the study and areas for future research were also identified.

Key words: COVID-19; adult learners; digital literacy

A Trauma-Informed Inquiry of COVID-19's Initial Impact on Students in Adult Education Programs in the United States

The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on adult education programs throughout the world has been profound, typically transforming in-person instruction into distant, online operations literally overnight. As Boeren et al. (2020) asserted, the "use of remote video conferencing," once considered novel, "has become commonplace" (p. 201) to the point where many now complain of "screen overload" or "Zoom fatigue." Those who oversee adult education programs, from community-based to vocational-training to higher education, have had to provide both instructors and students immediate training and support so the transition to instruction via online platforms could occur as smoothly as possible (Elfman, 2020; Kara et al., 2019; Kleisch et al., 2017). Given the now widely recognized "digital divide," equipment, like computers, webcams, and hot spots, often had to be provided, and instructors and students alike needed to master the requisite technical skills, so that a sense of continuity and cohesion could be maintained following the abrupt shift from in-person to remote teaching/learning (Goeman et al., 2020). This dramatic shift proved especially challenging for instructors and students who had not used educational technology before or who did not feel they were digital natives (Elfman, 2020; Hamlin & Leslie, 2019). The author quickly discovered that not only students but also many instructors lacked the "digital literacy skills" as well as an upgraded computer or "reliable access to the internet" to engage in online teaching and learning consistently (Boeren et al., 2020, p. 203). Many had to rely on mobile phones with limited data plans that obstructed their abilities to engage in distance teaching and learning productively.

In the United States, the pandemic has been disproportionate both in infection rates and deaths among already vulnerable, racially minoritized, and other economically disenfranchised

populations in densely populated urban areas where many adult education programs are located. The typical juggle of multiple responsibilities common among adult learners (Abdrahim, 2020; Day et al., 2011; Goeman & Deschacht, 2019; Kara et al., 2019; Kleisch et al., 2017) has been exacerbated by COVID-19 as they study and often work from home while dealing with spouses, children, and other family members who are also working and studying in the same physical spaces. These competing personal, employment, and family responsibilities have made focusing on academic work elusive. These feelings of distraction and overwhelm were only intensified by the uncertainty and fear surrounding the pandemic itself. The pandemic and its lingering impacts on adult education programs have likely raised more questions than provided conclusive answers, but, ultimately, challenges remain, including the following: How do we cultivate and maintain a community of engaged learners and empathetic, flexible faculty when they are not physically in the same space and their only interactions are virtual (Elfman, 2020; Kara et al., 2019)? What asynchronous and synchronous tools can be used to “minimize transactional distance and help students and faculty feel more involved, engaged, and real in online courses” (Dunlap et al., 2016, p. 146)? How do we nurture good online instructors who can “turn attendance, which can be required, into learning, which cannot” and facilitate fruitful participation and engagement where students feel their “voices, thoughts, perspective, and input matters” (Hamlin & Leslie, 2019, p. 15)?

Adult education will be irreparably changed by COVID-19, but can these challenges also be seen as opportunities? Could the impact of this global pandemic elevate adult learning and restructure adult education practices and policies in more equitable and efficacious ways moving forward (Boeren et al., 2020)? To answer this question, this study first explored the pandemic’s initial impact on adult students.

Research Questions

Since COVID-19 and its transformational impact on the running of adult education programs in the United States is unprecedented in recent history, there is nothing in the extant research literature that approximates its global and all-consuming impact in precisely the same way. The seemingly arbitrary nature of its infection rates due to population density, its ease of transmission, and its capricious remission and re-emergence with more easily transmissible variants have only heightened fear and anxiety and could potentially retraumatize people who have experienced previous or persistent trauma. Many students in adult education programs have been unduly burdened physically, economically, academically, and socially by the pandemic. Consequently, the following research questions that guided the research design and implementation of this study were intentionally broad so the experience of the participants could be investigated more comprehensively.

- 1) As a student in an adult education program in the United States, what impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on you personally and academically?
- 2) As a student in an adult education program in the United States, how have you adjusted to distance learning?

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

As in Housel and Oranjian (2021), the literature review and conceptual framework sections have been combined because the conceptual framework of trauma-informed and responsive instruction was not only a lens through which the data were analyzed and interpreted but also as an essential component of the literature review.

Literature Review Focusing on Distance Learning

Given the abrupt shift in instruction prompted by the pandemic, the most relevant and prolific area in the extant research literature was distance learning in adult education programs. Many have asserted the positive aspects of distance learning, like enhancing access to education, increasing flexibility (Blieck et al., 2019), and removing some barriers, like the time and cost of commuting to classes and of childcare expenses. In addition to enhancing access to real-world content and engaging materials (Housel & Oranjian, 2021), instructors can offer real-time feedback and personalize instruction for each student's academic needs, personal interests, or English proficiency levels, with little additional burden on the instructor (Faria et al., 2019). Despite the benefits, there are challenges to implementing remote teaching and learning that is innovative and impactful. Are instructors adequately trained to make distance learning meaningful and effective? Do students have access to the technology and the digital literacy to engage and actively participate in a virtual teaching/learning environment (Burke, 2019)? What can instructors do to counter potential drop-out rates (Goeman et al., 2020)? Will incorporating the principles of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015), like fostering student self-regulation, self-direction (Morris, 2019), and autonomy, into course design promote student's retention and success?

This literature review revealed three recurrent themes related to distance learning—adult learning theory (andragogy), instructor's social presence in virtual classes, and instructors and students' digital literacy and access to appropriate technology—that could provide answers to these questions. Abdrahim (2020) emphasized the importance of self-regulation, a key component of andragogy, as adults become familiar with the online course's structure and flow by engaging with course materials and resources at their own pace. Often, the virtual learning

environment is new for adult learners, especially older students who might not feel they are digital natives. Consequently, they must juggle the course's feasibility and usefulness to their learning needs and goals with the instructor's expectations for both participation and performance (Goeman et al., 2020; Knowles et al., 2015) to engage fully. Given this "learning curve" for many adult distance learners, Abdrahim (2020) encouraged instructors to be patient and flexible. This flexibility has been crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic as adult learners confront the stress and anxiety related to the pandemic itself while simultaneously juggling multiple responsibilities (Day et al., 2011). By emphasizing the importance of motivation in engaging adult learners with collaborative learning, Diep et al. (2019) also affirmed other related components of andragogy, self-directed learning and learner autonomy. Major and Calandrino (2018) and Pawl (2018) advanced the concept of microlearning, i.e., presenting chunks of information that are scaffolded toward a larger learning goal or task, which can enable adult learners to process information at their own pace. Related to cognitive processing, Youde (2020) suggested the creation of a "space," usually through combining synchronous with asynchronous activities (Kleisch et al., 2017), so adults can both reflect on information and process what they have learned. This additional processing and reflection time is critical for adults who are acquiring English as an additional language at an academic level or who simply might need more time to synthesize content. Such andragogical accommodations are also foundational components of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018).

The instructor's social presence in virtual learning environments was another theme in the extant literature (Blieck et al., 2019; Burke, 2019; Kennan et al., 2018; Pawl, 2018; Swartzwelder et al., 2019). Consistent with andragogy and promoting student-centered learning, instructors should be "collaborators" in the learning process (Swartzwelder et al., 2019).

Collaboration and social presence can be fostered by consistently engaging and supporting students by staying organized, managing time well, and facilitating small group activities (Bleick et al., 2019; Burke, 2019; Pawl, 2018). Kennan et al. (2018) argued that, instead of being the aloof “sage on the stage,” instructors must be approachable and accessible. They should be mindful of each student’s unique learning needs, present content in understandable ways, provide detailed and meaningful feedback, and establish clear expectations about work and performance evaluations (Hodge & Chenelle, 2018). Individualizing both instruction and support materials is a component of Kennan et al.’s approach as well as essential to UDL (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018).

Digital literacy among both instructors and their students is likely the most essential component of effective distance teaching/learning, especially minimizing any technological barriers that could interfere with online engagement and participation (Diep et al., 2019). Although students and faculty alike need ongoing training and support (Bleick et al., 2019; Burke, 2019), Kleish et al. (2017) focused on instructors and their need to gain competence in both andragogy and educational technology. With such understanding, they can individualize instruction and promote adaptive learning in a virtual classroom. Faculty can bolster their social presence by addressing their adult learners’ needs, especially those complicated by the pandemic (Burke, 2019), fostering student engagement, and cultivating a “community of learners.” Aligned with andragogy, faculty should connect content and discipline areas to their students’ learning needs by managing discussion boards effectively and providing prompt, constructive feedback in a virtual environment (Kleisch et al., 2017; Knowles et al., 2015).

As mentioned previously, UDL is embedded within these andragogical strategies. UDL is a flexible and strengths-based approach where faculty can engage diverse students by

implementing multiple means of representation, action, and expression (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). By using multiple modalities, UDL can promote discussion and interaction among students, facilitate engagement with course content (Swartzwelder et al., 2019), and ultimately foster equity, inclusion, and justice (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018).

Conceptual Framework

“Sadly, the world is filled with untoward turns and unexpected events that rattle the cages of even the most stable individuals” (Gross, 2020, p. 67).

This quote from Gross’ groundbreaking and foundational work on trauma in educational settings feels particularly relevant when unpacking the traumatic responses of adult students sparked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gross differentiates between *big E* traumatic events, those we typically associate with trauma, and *small e* traumatic events, which are perhaps less dramatic but no-less destabilizing. *Big E* traumatic events are generally “one-time or repeated circumstances that lead to a disruption of a sense of safety, attachment, and stability” (p. 13). Examples of *big E* events include war and military combat (Church, 2009; Helms & Libertz, 2014; Magro, 2006), terrorist attacks, plane crashes, natural disasters, intimate partner violence and sexual assault (Horsman, 2004), incarceration, and mass shootings. *Small e* traumatic events can be equally damaging and debilitating to educational performance and include sexual harassment, bullying, and daily microaggressions based on race, gender, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic class. Undiagnosed learning disabilities, autism, and mental health issues and their misinterpretation in adult educational settings can also prove traumatic (Housel, 2020a) as can immigration and resettlement experiences (Wilbur, 2016). Ultimately, Gross asserted that “there is no such thing as ‘little trauma.’ It’s like saying one is a little pregnant” (p. 12).

Although responses to trauma can vary by person and are intensified by previous traumatic experiences, especially those from childhood, the classic autonomic nervous system response is *fight, flight, or freeze*. In educational settings, these responses could manifest in a student failing to attend or participate in class, to do assigned work, or to turn on their microphones and webcams in virtual settings. These students appear dysregulated or disorganized, reliant on external supports for motivation, reluctant to interact with others, or unable to follow a schedule and respect deadlines, which can have negative and potentially punitive consequences. Those with the opposite response to trauma are the “star,” hyper-regulated students who consistently go “beyond the call of duty” and do impeccable work, which is exalted, sanctioned, and rewarded in most adult educational settings. What educational professional immediately suspects trauma among their best and most diligent students? Similarly, we must be mindful that educational topics and content can trigger or reactivate previous trauma. As Gross (2020) cautioned, educators should not be so quick to judge and dismiss, punish, or elevate students’ behaviors but instead “ask the right questions, observe behavior differently, and handle students in a new manner” (p. 21). This heightened self-awareness among the stakeholders in adult education programs—administrators, instructors, and students—will help all to identify trauma responses both within themselves and among others. Since COVID-19 can spark both primary trauma (as detailed above) and secondary trauma (compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma), educational professionals must promote patience, tolerance, and self-care, especially among their students.

Gross’ (2020) mantra throughout her text seems to be “if we can name it [trauma], you can begin to tame it” (p. xvii) because trauma can only be managed but never “cured” (p. 7). Gross argued that all educational programs and institutions must move beyond simply being

trauma aware to becoming “trauma responsive and skilled” (p. xiv). Much like Boeren et al. (2020) asserted, the COVID-19 pandemic could act as a conduit for needed change where the role of adult education and “our assumptions about student behavior, our thinking about the role of educators, the place and space in which education happens, and our approaches for measuring educational success” (Gross, 2020, p. xv) can be modified to address our changed world. Approaches like UDL that address the needs of students experiencing trauma can, in the end, help all students in both in-person and distance teaching/learning settings.

Positionality

The author has been a licensed social worker for over 30 years and has worked within the field of adult literacy, primarily with adult emergent bi/multilingual learners (EBLs) in postsecondary settings, as an instructor, counselor, and administrator for over 20 years. This professional experience, training in TESOL, and his own adjustments to working and running an adult education program remotely prompted the focus of this study and its research questions. The research design was the author’s quest to understand the initial impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students in adult education programs in the United States in a trauma-informed way. Since some of the research participants are from English as an additional Language (EAL) programs, the use of the term, *emergent bi/multilingual learner*, is inspired and affirmed by the work of Otheguy et al. (2015) and Colombo et al. (2019) and is intended to counter the pervasive deficit models in educational contexts in the United States surrounding adults learning English as an additional language, challenge the hegemony of English, and acknowledge and leverage students’ full linguistic repertoires.

Methodology

Recruitment for participants in this exploratory study occurred within a large metropolitan area in the northeastern United States that was one of the pandemic's first epicenters and included students from primarily adult basic education, EAL, and higher education programs. The more limited response rate to the primarily open-ended survey could reflect the pressing and competing demands brought by the pandemic itself, the length of the survey instrument and the time and thought needed to complete it, and the preoccupations and emotional reactions of the adult students targeted as manifestations of COVID-related trauma. The respondents should not be considered representative, but their insights have merit and provide a glimpse into adult students' perspectives regarding the impact of the pandemic on them as participants in adult education programs in the United States.

Participants

Using existing networks of professional organizations and consortia of adult education programs in the northeastern United States and snowball sampling, adult students were recruited to participate in the study. After being screened as having participated in adult education programs from March 2020 (when distance teaching/learning was widely implemented) through December of 2020, participants provided informed consent before completing an online survey instrument. Twenty-eight adult students participated in the study: 18 (64.3%) were from community or academic English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs; five (17.9%) from higher education; three (10.7%) were from adult basic skills or high school equivalency programs; and two (7.1%) from "other" (unspecified). Twenty-seven responded to the remaining demographic questions: nineteen identified as female (70.4%) and eight as male (29.6%) and ranged in age from 19 to 53 (mean 26.3) years. Twelve (44.4%) identified as Asian

or Pacific Islander; nine (33.3%) as Hispanic or Latinx; three (11.1%) as African American or Black; two (7.4%) as White; and one (3.7%) as “other” (unspecified).

Data Collection

The survey instrument was administered online and functioned as a virtual structured interview. Other than demographic questions to ascertain an accurate sample profile, three yes-no questions related to preferred instructional format (in-person, online, or hybrid), and two Likert scale items assessing their digital literacy skills before and after studying remotely due to the pandemic, the questions were open-ended. The intention of the open-ended questions and the anonymity of the survey itself was to encourage participants to respond honestly and in a manner unfettered or constrained by any limitations that multiple choice or similar items might have imposed.

Data Analysis

After conducting basic statistical analyses on the demographic items (detailed above) and the yes-no and Likert-scale items, the remaining open-ended questions were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis techniques suggested by Patton (2015) and Saldaña (2016), given their stature and expertise as qualitative researchers. These qualitative responses were hand-coded through multiple rounds and analyzed using the lens of the study’s conceptual framework and guided by its research questions. Ultimately, major themes emerged. Because the online surveys were completed anonymously, member checking to ensure the accuracy and representativeness of the findings was not possible.

Findings

The lone questions on the survey that could be analyzed quantitatively addressed the adult students’ current and future preferences for in-person, online, or hybrid instruction, their

perceptions of guidance and support during the initial change to remote instruction, and their self-assessment of their technological skills and knowledge of educational technology before and after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift to distance learning. Their preferences regarding instructional format will be discussed at the end of this section, following the “pros” and “cons” of distance teaching/learning during the pandemic. With the technological knowledge questions, the sample size was not large enough to assert statistical significance, but the mean scores for these questions were not noticeably different. Perhaps adult students were more likely to be “digital natives” whose adjustment to distance learning was simply less disorienting and more seamless. After all, they did not have to produce content nor provide instruction in a new format as much as access the new teaching/learning format, respond to their instructors’ lead, and complete required tasks and assignments.

In the qualitative analysis, the following overarching themes emerged through the coding process: (1) anxiety and loss; (2) distractions, adjustments, and balance; and (3) distance learning and its advantages and disadvantages.

Anxiety and Loss

The first theme, anxiety and loss, emerged from the psycho-social-emotional impact of the pandemic itself, which has gotten conflated with the experience of remote learning. Some of the participants had gotten sick with COVID themselves, others had to care for sick friends and family, and others lost loved ones without having access to the traditional rituals surrounding grief and mourning (e.g., in-person services and burials). Others were fearful of contagion or worse, especially essential workers (“I feel safer at home”), yet many experienced profound social isolation (“I feel like I am inside all the time”). This loss of contact with family and friends, especially elderly and more susceptible family members, brought about heightened

feelings of anxiety and depression. Many lost their jobs and income, which challenged meeting basic survival needs, including rent, and exacerbated the inability to concentrate and remain focused on required academic tasks. There was the loss of a “usual routine” and the ability to “hang out with friends.” One participant mentioned “staying away from the news,” which was overwhelming and prompted feelings of helplessness, and “listening to music” and “reading more to cope with the pandemic” and “remain positive.” Clearly, these psycho-social-emotional experiences fall under Gross’ conceptualization of trauma.

Distractions, Adjustment, and Balance

The constantly changing realities, especially at the initial stages of the public health lockdown prompted by the pandemic, demanded a recurrent cycle of adjustments and almost daily readjustments. In addition to studying and working from home, many were homeschooling their children. In urban areas, most live in small, crowded living spaces with multiple generations, all working, studying, and living in the same cramped space. The constant activity in their homes and the accompanying noise proved very distracting for many participants. Finding a private space to work and study was also a challenge, with many opting to lock themselves in bathrooms to engage in online coursework. Still others were working as grocery cashiers, fast-food workers, or home health attendants and became the sole financial supports for their families. Others referred to what we now call “COVID time” where the sameness and the constancy of one’s physical surroundings caused one day to blend into the next. Staring at computer screens for multiple hours per day has since become known as “Zoom fatigue.” Both “COVID time” and “Zoom fatigue” impact adult students’ feelings of mental health and well-being and can be experienced as small *e* trauma (Gross, 2020).

Distance Learning and Its Advantages and Disadvantages

One participant mentioned that assessing distance learning and its efficacy, fairly and impartially, was difficult because of the “overlay of COVID,” the “realities of the pandemic,” and their potential traumatic impact that have become associated and intertwined with this learning format. Historically, online coursework was voluntary and optional, but with the pandemic lockdown, distance learning and online coursework were the only options and compulsory. The participants could, however, identify advantages (“pros”) and disadvantages (“cons”) with online teaching and learning, including both the synchronous and asynchronous portions of virtual classes.

The most often cited advantage was the “flexibility” and “accessibility” of distance learning (Blieck et al., 2019). Participants appreciated being able to save time and money without having to commute. They could spend more time with their children and families in their households versus having to secure safe and affordable childcare to attend in-person classes. Others liked that their classmates and instructors arrived on time and were grateful that they were still able to study with the “social distance and safety during the pandemic” that distance learning provided. Without commuting, they had “more time to do homework” (i.e., asynchronous coursework) and could “multitask.” Consistent with Kara et al. (2019) and Hodge and Chanelle (2018), many felt that there was “more equalitarian participation” in online classes where instructors can “monitor the class more effectively” and individualize instruction and feedback as needed, which is consistent with UDL (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018).

The most cited disadvantage of distance learning was the digital divide related to not having the required technology (e.g., having to borrow a loaner laptop from the university or lacking a printer or print materials at home) and/or sufficient internet access (e.g., “My internet

tends to crash”). While some saw more egalitarian participation in distance learning, others felt “forced” or “pressured” to participate, especially shy students or those who lacked confidence in their English-language abilities. They felt that they simply could not “hide” as easily as they could in an in-person classroom. Everything feels more “difficult” and “time-consuming,” especially “communicating directly with instructors or professors” (which aligns with Jackson, 2019), with “more homework” (via asynchronous assignments) and “more limited classroom activities” than with in-person instruction. Others lamented the inability to read the “non-verbal cues” or “body language” of instructors and classmates well, to communicate more freely and organically with classmates, to develop friendships and identify “study buddies,” and for EBLs to practice English face-to-face. Others mentioned the “brain fog” and eye strain and discomfort related to “screen and Zoom fatigue.”

Of the 26 participants who responded, 17 (65.4%) preferred in-person instruction and nine (34.6%) preferred remote learning. Those who preferred in-person instruction said this format provided “enhanced, more authentic interaction” where it was “easier to communicate and concentrate” and “to ask for help and guidance.” Those who preferred remote learning mentioned feeling “safer during the pandemic” due to my “fear of COVID” and appreciated the “flexibility with busy work schedules and other responsibilities” and “having more control over my time” with no need “to commute to class.” One participant mentioned feeling more self-disciplined and autonomous with their learning, which aligns with the student autonomy and self-regulation components of andragogy (Diep et al., 2019; Knowles et al., 2015).

Of the 27 participants who responded, 22 (81.5%) would take an online class in the future while five (18.5%) would not. Beyond the flexibility and access mentioned previously, one participant said that “online classes are a good experience for individuals that tend to have a lot

on their plates,” which is consistent with Day et al. (2011) and others (Abdrahim, 2020; Goeman & Deschacht, 2019; Kara et al., 2019; Kleisch et al., 2017). Another concurred and added that it provides “easier access to education and the ability to continue studying for a better future,” which aligns with Blicke et al. (2019). One participant said that taking an online class in the future would depend on the course’s “content,” while another said they would take perhaps “one but not multiple” classes online.

Of the 27 who responded, 18 (66.7%) would take a hybrid class in the future and nine (33.3%) would not. One participant couched a hybrid class as the “balance between online and in-person learning” and “the best of both worlds.” Aligned with UDL (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018), one participant appreciated the “ability to process content more leisurely while still having in-person interactions,” which “enhances access to the professor and the ability to ask questions directly.” Another liked “acquiring new skills for the future with the online [component of hybrid] coursework.” Those less inclined for a hybrid class either preferred “in-person interactions exclusively” or “one [in-person] or the other [online] but not both [hybrid].”

Discussion and Implications

“Teachers could be more compassionate and understanding with their students.
Many of us are barely hanging on by a thread.”—from a survey participant

Directly related to the research questions, the above quote highlighted the psycho-social-emotional and traumatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on adult students and the need to support instructors in improving their online instruction (Bleick et al., 2019; Burke, 2019; Kleish et al., 2017) and social presence (Goeman et al., 2020). In other words, how did instructors support, or not support, their adult students’ adjustment to distance teaching and learning during the pandemic? Connected to this question and this study’s findings and given that remote teaching/learning will likely remain a part of adult education programs in the future, how can

online instruction be improved? This question was posed of the participants in this study. They felt that more tutoring to augment the online instruction was necessary. Instructors needed to provide more direction and encouragement to their students, especially through more clear and scaffolded instructions and assignments (Major & Calandrino, 2018; Pawl, 2018). They would appreciate more flexibility with deadlines for assignments and more training on Zoom and other online platforms. They would like instructors to provide more one-on-one conferencing and online “office hours,” which was supported by Hodge and Chanelle (2018). They requested more balance between synchronous and asynchronous class activities with “shorter lecture times but more class participation through pair and group work and whole-class discussions” (Jackson, 2019). They would like instructors who use BlackBoard and similar learning management systems (LMSs) to use these platforms more effectively to promote student engagement, dialogue, and support. Consistent with UDL (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018), they would like instructors to record online class sessions and lectures so content can be reviewed more leisurely. They also requested the use of more visual and multimedia presentations in the instructors’ online presentations and LMSs. They advocated for more alternative forms of assessment “with fewer assignments and less testing” (Kara et al., 2019) as well as more psychosocial support, referrals to community resources (e.g., food pantries and unemployment insurance) by program counselors (Housel, 2020a), and more job training and placement due to the economic impact of the pandemic and the accompanying loss of jobs, sometimes permanently, in some market sectors. This immediate application of education and training (Hanstock, 2004) aligns well with andragogy (Knowles et al., 2015).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The most obvious limitations of this study are its more limited sample size, its geographic specificity, and its lack of representativeness. Conducting this study in other parts of the United States and internationally could either affirm its findings or shine new light and insights on the global challenge of effective online instruction. Similarly, those who participated should not be considered representative because of the convenience nature of the sampling. The hope of conducting the study closer temporally to the initial impact of the pandemic was intended to counter how the passage of time and subsequent adaptation could alter participants' recollections, which could be a complicating factor in future studies. Changing the research design to include virtual, or ideally in-person, interviews of adult students and their instructors separately would be another recommendation for future study. Developing questions that focus more specifically on online learning for adult students and enhancing online instruction for their instructors, based on the lessons learned from the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, would be other recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

Although the findings of this exploratory study likely raised more questions than it answered and cannot be considered definitive, the adult students who participated were clear about their experiences of trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were equally forthcoming about how distance teaching and learning could be improved, especially during the time of a global public health pandemic. Consistent with a similar study of adult students (Housel, 2020b), participants felt that “effective” instructors of adults should have expertise in andragogical principles (Abdrahim, 2020; Knowles et al., 2015) and “digital literacy” (Elfman, 2020; Kleish et al., 2017). They should also be attuned and supportive of their students' psycho-

social-emotional needs. In a virtual teaching/learning environment, that would entail enhancing the instructor's "social presence," flexibility, and empathy. They mentioned the importance of ongoing training and support in educational technology and "digital literacy" for both themselves and their instructors to address the "pernicious digital divide" (Boeren et al., 2020). In addition to improved digital literacy, they mentioned the need for a balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities to process content at their own pace and heightened academic support through tutoring so they could flourish in a virtual teaching/learning environment (Bleick et al., 2019; Burke, 2019; Kleish et al., 2017).

Given the realities of adult students in general, but especially during a pandemic, this training should be trauma informed, at a minimum, but ideally trauma responsive and skilled (Gross, 2020) and incorporate the student-centered and individualized approaches inherent in UDL (Housel, 2020a; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). These recommendations and suggestions for improved policies surrounding online instruction asserted by the study participants support the five Ss of trauma-responsive programs as identified by Gross (2020): *stability*, *structure*, *safety*, *subtlety*, and *someone(s)*. For example, *stability* includes maintaining and supporting the tenure of instructors and staff through ongoing professional development and support. Fostering peer tutoring programs that support students who might be struggling academically, identified as a need in this study, is another way of promoting stability through student retention.

Administrators of adult ESOL programs (Housel, 2022) mentioned that consistent professional development can be elusive due to fiscal and logistic realities (e.g., instructors are often working in multiple locations given the adjunct nature of adult education in the United States). Often, a culture to support ongoing professional development and growth is absent, especially in higher education settings (Bachelor, 2015; Backus, 1984), so there would need to

be a paradigm shift and the financial resources allocated to make consistent professional development for instructors and ongoing academic support for students a fixture in adult educational settings.

Structure would include the flexibility in the layout of desks and chairs in physical classrooms (i.e., other than in set rows and lines) or the fluidity of whole group and pair/small group work in virtual classrooms or asynchronous assignments. *Safety* would include curtailing or completely eradicating incidents of microaggressions, harassment, and bullying while nurturing student engagement in mutually respectful ways. Actively addressing these incidents and their curtailment are also ways to promote safety. *Subtlety* requires that instructors look beyond the surface of students' behaviors before judging or penalizing them. For example, an inability to maintain focus, respect deadlines, and keep a webcam on during a remote class session might be manifestations of trauma versus disinterest in the class, lack of motivation, or worse apathy and laziness. Gross' notion of *someone(s)* is showcased throughout the findings of this study by highlighting the need for adult students to feel respected and supported by their instructors. According to Gross (2020), "for educational institutions to be trauma responsive, the role of educators has to expand" (p. 121). This expansion could include extending instructors' virtual office hours or, as mentioned above, promoting their social presence, constructive and timely feedback, and support in remote teaching/learning environments. Compensating instructors for this additional work, through wages or compensatory time, is a way of simultaneously supporting them and promoting the stability of your program or institution.

As Boeren et al. (2020) posited, can the lessons learned from the pandemic be leveraged to elevate adult learning and formulate more equitable, just, and effective educational practices and policies to support our instructors and our students to thrive in our changed world? As

advocated by Gross (2020), trauma-responsive policies, practices, and programs are an effective way of addressing the trauma prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Quite frankly, to promote longevity and efficacy in the field and optimal educational and vocational outcomes, our instructors and adult students simply deserve nothing less.

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