In Search of Silver Linings: Strategies for Preparing Future Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In this article, we describe our experience as a racially and disciplinarily diverse, relatively junior program team who embraced the opportunity to transform a 20-year-old professional development seminar for graduate students into a remote offering in response to COVID-19. Our efforts to support our participants and champion an institutional move toward equitable and effective virtual programming are situated alongside the psychological tolls of remote work, a global health crisis, and ongoing racial violence across the United States. We recount our experience using, as a helpful metaphor, Lewin's change model, which describes the process of "unfreezing," "changing," and "refreezing" long-standing assumptions and practices to bring about positive cultural changes within an organization. In particular, we highlight the tools and practices we implemented to increase equitable online engagement while also offsetting the burden on program facilitators who were constrained in time and resources. We then offer some reflections about possibilities afforded by intentionally designed, community-centered virtual professional development programs for graduate students and beyond.

Keywords: Graduate students, professional development, community building, remote teaching

Unfreeze: Embracing an Opportunity for Change

The Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) seminar is a 5-week program designed to help a cohort of 65 graduate students through the stressful and often isolating process of preparing for the academic job market. It is sponsored by the Rackham Graduate School and produced by staff from the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan. The seminar is held each May and consists of 10 3-hour, face-to-face (F2F) sessions in which participants from diverse disciplines learn about the fundamentals of college teaching and faculty life. Since its inception in 2000, PFF has become one of CRLT's most sought-after programs due in large part to the sense of community participants experience through deliberate experiential and team-based learning structures. In particular, they report appreciating the following: (a) **dedicated time** to develop their teaching practice and job materials; (b) **working with peers** to discuss teaching strategies and to review job documents; and (c) **access to experts** in teaching and learning through facilitated sessions, visits to local campuses, and invited faculty panels.

Key Considerations

These foundational elements of the PFF seminar, in particular its F2F format, had remained fairly constant over the years because the program continued to garner a strong reputation through positive evaluations and word of mouth. Despite the potential benefits of a flexible, online version of this popular community-based program, reallocating resources to such a pivot wasn't something we had seriously considered until the COVID-19 pandemic. Schein (1996) describes this state as "the quasi-stationary equilibria" or "frozen" nature of certain institutional practices that are held in place because they are not seen as worth changing. But after COVID-19 disrupted 20 years of equilibria, the only options were to (a) "put it back in the freezer" and postpone the seminar until we could "return to normal" (as was the case with

many other major spring programs) or (b) embrace the “unfreezing” process to see if we could create a remote program that met the rapidly evolving needs of our graduate students. To make this decision, our program team expeditiously worked through the following considerations:

1. Do we need to do this (now)?

Each year, the seminar is scheduled for the start of summer when graduate students have fewer teaching responsibilities and would benefit from structured time to prepare for the fall job cycle. Accordingly, our planning for 2020 started the preceding November, and by early March we had selected our cohort of 65 participants from a total of 125 eligible applicants. When news of COVID-19 hit, we started receiving emails from accepted participants hoping we would still be willing to run the seminar because this was the last year they could take it and they were particularly worried about the volatility of the upcoming job market. It was clear they needed the content and community support of PFF now more than ever, so we assured them we were exploring all possibilities.

2. Are we the right people to do this?

Our 2020 program team was notably diverse in terms of racial identities and disciplinary backgrounds, which gave us an incredible set of skills and experiences to draw upon in redesigning such a complex program. Our lead facilitator, Dr. Tazin Daniels, a medical anthropologist, had been involved with PFF since 2016 and had over a decade of experience designing and teaching equitable online courses. Our co-facilitator, Dr. Elizabeth Bailey, a chemist and new instructional consultant, brought content expertise and a fresh set of eyes to review each aspect of the program. Our graduate program assistant, Anoff Cobblah, a literary critic, brought the invaluable perspective of being a past participant and knew the learning management system, Canvas,

very well. We also had the benefit of two event coordinators, Hannah Burke and Malini Dasgupta, who took on many logistical responsibilities to ensure a smooth transition. Most importantly, we had a well-developed team dynamic, built in the previous 4 months upon co-created communication norms and multiple conversations about shared visioning and democratic decision-making.

3. Do we have the resources to do this well?

Our center's senior leadership agreed that our team should prioritize developing a remote version of the seminar to serve as a pilot for our major fall teaching orientations and academies that would likely also be delivered remotely. This meant we would be intentionally shielded from the influx of requests to support faculty in the sudden pivot to remote teaching. We balanced our optimism for what we might accomplish with the reality that our psychological resources would be stretched, as each of us had to make the shift to remote work and were differently impacted by COVID-19. We would need to rely on one another to communicate our needs, set boundaries, and support one another over the next 3 months to pull this off.

Securing Stakeholder Buy-in

Schein (1996) explains that a key element of the unfreezing stage is the creation of "psychological safety" among stakeholders who might be resistant to change. Although COVID-19 took a F2F seminar off the table, we still had to convince both our financial sponsor, the Graduate School, and participants that we were committed and equipped to deliver on the original goals of the seminar (Levasseur, 2001). In addition, we knew that building a successful online community would involve new challenges, such as encouraging commitment and contribution in this new and unexpected format (Kraut & Resnick, 2012). With this in mind, we identified the following set of values to frame our decisions for our stakeholders:

1. **Transparency:** We should be clear about how and why we make certain design choices within the seminar.
2. **Equity:** We should ensure that as many accepted participants as possible are able to benefit from the seminar, regardless of their personal circumstances.
3. **Flexibility:** We should make the experience customizable to meet the range of individual expectations and needs.
4. **Care:** We should be realistic about what is possible during this time and try our best to not overburden ourselves or our participants.

Based on these criteria, we ultimately settled on a 5-week asynchronous, paced format, with non-mandatory options for synchronous interaction. Once we received approval from the Graduate School, we reached out to participants again in early April, and 58 graduate students confirmed their commitment to participate in the remote seminar that would launch in less than a month.

Change: Implementing Equitable Structures and Practices

Having generated initial buy-in and successfully “unfrozen” the traditional F2F format of PFF, we began the exciting work of building and implementing a set of new structures and practices to facilitate a flexible community-based experience online. Scholarship on online learning and teaching (Berry, 2019; Hill, 2002; Thormann & Fidalgo, 2014) and online professional development workshops (Hokanson et al., 2019) has demonstrated the importance of community building in online spaces but also that building these communities can be challenging. For this to work, we needed to facilitate what Schein (1996) calls “cognitive restructuring,” or a shift in understanding and assessments of what a “sense of community” should look and feel like in this new remote environment.

Building Community Asynchronously

One of the key inclusive changes we made to the seminar was that participants would not be required to meet synchronously at a specific time to earn a certificate of completion. We digitized and released all of our content and assignments via Canvas on a regular schedule, allowing participants flexibility in when they would interact with materials. In particular, we relied on the following mechanisms to facilitate asynchronous interactions between participants, with facilitators, and with faculty mentors: video introductions, discussion boards, weekly announcements, and pre-recorded faculty panels.

Video Introductions

An effective assignment we developed to help us all feel a little less like disembodied text on a screen was the “1-minute video introduction.” In addition to a joint program team introduction video, each of us uploaded a 1-minute video in which we introduced ourselves and shared a meaningful person, pet, or object on camera. We also asked participants to upload their own videos (with an option for a text introduction), and 100% participated. The facilitators and program assistant commented on each video to welcome the participants, and we were excited to see that the participants were doing the same for one another even when it was not required.

Discussion Boards

Although we had used Canvas to post supplemental materials for the seminar in previous years, this year we took advantage of the many functions for asynchronous interactions. In addition to having participants upload their completed job documents, we created a weekly discussion board assignment that asked participants to share insights gained that week. Reading through these responses was particularly enlightening for the program team as it helped us see what was most useful and also gave

us insights into some of the offline conversations the participants were having with one another. Although we did not require participants to comment on one another's posts, we did emphasize that these reflections were valuable resources that served as one proxy for reflecting that would happen organically during F2F discussions.

Weekly Announcements

In addition to sending out some scheduled reminders for upcoming assignments, we used Canvas to stay in frequent contact with participants. Facilitators posted weekly videos contextualizing that week's materials and addressing topics that emerged in discussion boards. The announcement feature of Canvas was also used to send out several pivotal messages over the course of the 5-week seminar. Evaluations of PFF from previous years had signaled appreciation for the honesty and vulnerability facilitators modeled when addressing difficult topics. We had just wrapped up a unit on inclusive and anti-racist teaching when the news of George Floyd's murder broke and the subsequent protests erupted. Our team called an emergency meeting to check in with one another and to write a message of solidarity to our participants who were already dealing with the stress of COVID-19, writing dissertations, and preparing for an uncertain job market. We also used the opportunity to share resources on community care and allyship and offered extensions on assignments for the rest of the seminar.

Pre-recorded Faculty Panels

Panel discussions with teaching faculty, tenure-track faculty, and community college faculty about their work-life and strategies for success are an important part of the F2F seminar. They help participants understand what it will be like to enter a new academic community and also assist in participants forming networks to aid their job search. In the remote seminar, we collected questions from participants in ad-

vance and used them to inform a series of pre-recorded panel interviews, conducted via Zoom by PFF facilitators. These sessions were edited and shared as resources, and participants were encouraged to reach out to panelists to thank them and ask any follow-up questions.

Building Community Synchronously

Although we knew that not all participants would be interested or available to participate in synchronous meetings, we wanted to design some optional opportunities to connect with their peers, the program team, and faculty mentors in real time. In particular, we relied on the following synchronous mechanisms to increase accountability and support while also offsetting the burden on program facilitators who were constrained in time and resources: mutual accountability groups, community gatherings, and faculty mentor meetings.

Mutual Accountability Groups

The goal of these optional groups was to give participants agency to build micro-communities within the seminar that could be adapted to their personal needs with limited oversight from program facilitators. We sent out a survey to gauge each participant's interest, availability for weekly meetings, and willingness to serve as a group leader, then used that information to create groups of five to six people. We then sent each leader a starter packet with guidance on how to lead the first meeting and ideas on developing team structures and norms within their groups. Group leaders were welcome to reach out if they needed assistance; otherwise, these groups ran themselves without additional support from the program team.

Community Gatherings

After the first week, we determined we had the capacity to add two "community gatherings" for participants to interact with the program

facilitators and meet other members of the PFF community in real time via Zoom. Each session included four parts: (a) introductions and framing; (b) small, mixed breakout rooms to identify common questions without a facilitator; (c) two facilitated breakout rooms to address questions; and (d) a final large group share-out of key takeaways from both rooms. A key element of each gathering was a shared Google Doc with scaffolded sections for each activity that allowed us to view in real time the questions participants were generating in the small, mixed breakout rooms. The document also served as a mechanism for clarifying questions and voting on discussion topics in the third part, allowing us to prioritize during our limited time together. Finally, we used this document as a way to capture the conversation so we could later share key takeaways with participants who could not attend.

Faculty Mentor Meetings

In the F2F seminar, participants are invited to visit one of four nearby academic institutions and meet faculty who share insights about their career trajectory. In addition to helping participants reflect on different types of academic institutions they might apply to, these visits allow participants to meet with faculty mentors and form professional connections to aid in their job search. Although participants could not visit these institutions this year, we worked with our liaisons at partner institutions to pair each participant with a faculty mentor whom they could contact. We asked participants to email their faculty match to schedule a phone or video conversation, creating an opportunity to ask important questions and build their network.

Feedback: Adjusting Our Metrics of Success

The average final evaluation for the seminar was 85%, with 50 out of 58 participants rating the seminar as either *valuable* or *very valuable*, on a 4-point scale. We also evaluated the success of the seminar by

collecting written feedback from participants about their experiences after each week. Although we received many words of appreciation for what we were able to accomplish, it was also clear that the “cognitive restructuring” of old assumptions and expectations around community in virtual spaces would be an ongoing process. Many participants applied to PFF because they had heard positive things about the F2F format of this successful and long-standing program. For example, one participant mourned “the co-located cohort/workshop-like classroom experience that I was looking forward to.” While these comparisons could lead to pessimistic reflections on what COVID-19 has taken away, we understand them to be an expected part of an unexpected remote experience, as well as evidence of a clear desire for more synchronous interactions with facilitators and peers.

Participant-Participant Community Building

Mutual accountability groups were one of the community-based structures that participants evaluated highly. Forty-six participants reported meeting with their group during the seminar, and many emphasized that interactions with peers were essential to their engagement with seminar material. Participants also reported that mutual accountability groups motivated them and introduced them to the perspectives of graduate students from other departments. Moreover, in a summer marked by an increased visibility of racial violence, many participants shared that their mutual accountability groups acted as support networks and spaces for honest reflection on difficult topics. One participant even stated that they “couldn’t have designed a better way to go through this course material if I tried.” Another specifically noted that “[m]eeting other graduate students was part of the reason I wanted to participate in this seminar” and that the mutual accountability groups had fulfilled that goal for them. At least one group shared that they planned to continue meeting after the seminar ended. Multiple participants described mutual accountability groups as the *most valuable* or *best* part of PFF.

Participant-Facilitator Community Building

Feedback also highlights the success of our strategies for fostering connections between participants and the facilitators. One participant shared that community gatherings “helped recreate some of the atmosphere of a synchronous session. It was really nice to connect in real time and [it] helped provide a sense of community.” On average, participants who attended community gatherings rated the value of the seminar more highly. Participants also appreciated that weekly introductory videos from facilitators allowed the seminar to adapt to participant concerns as the seminar unfolded. One participant noted that the videos “felt like a discussion more than a one-sided presentation.” Another submitted that they “liked how present the [program] team was, in spite of the seminar being remote.” Participants also emphasized appreciation for the transparency and the flexibility of our virtual format during a time of crisis.

Refreeze: Informing Possibilities for the Future

The final stage of Lewin’s change model is “refreezing” when the change begins to take hold. Schein (1996) explains that it is valuable for individuals and organizations to establish “positive identifications with role models” who successfully made the change and see the benefits through their eyes. Participant feedback signals that they understood this format of PFF to be an exceptional, singular instance, and this instability can make it difficult to appreciate the value of certain aspects of the remote experience. However, if the tools we built around virtual community building are “refrozen” and become stable options for graduate student professional development programming moving forward, we anticipate participants will arrive with better aligned expectations and leave with more positive experiences.

According to Burnes (2004), lasting change requires refreezing to be compatible with other organizational goals and behaviors. We have

some preliminary evidence of how the PFF seminar is already informing the design of other remote programming, which suggests that the refreezing process is well underway and structures created for the remote PFF seminar are applicable to other programs. For example, the mutual accountability group structure was used in the design of a fall graduate student instructor orientation at the University of Michigan and will be used in an upcoming seminar on inclusive teaching. Pre-recorded panels with faculty and students—inspired by PFF panel interviews—were one of the most valued elements of a remote and largely asynchronous orientation for new engineering faculty at our institution in the summer of 2020. Additionally, the community gathering structure featuring the use of shared Google Docs has been incorporated into several remote workshops and was adopted as the foundational structure for the “You Are Not Alone” POD professional development series this summer.

Refreezing can be a slow process. We know that many of the changes we have made to build community in virtual spaces are likely still crystallizing and may take on new forms in future years of PFF and in future educational development programs. However, based on our experiences as facilitators of this seminar, the feedback from participants, and the success of our strategies for community building in other programs, we feel that these are changes that can and should be embraced and incorporated into future remote programs. According to Lewin (1947), successful change must treat permanent refreezing as an explicit objective to be worked toward. In writing this article and sharing these reflections, we take another step toward refreezing, solidifying a changed understanding of what is possible in remote programming, even when it must be undertaken rapidly and under extreme conditions. We hope the PFF seminar can serve as a case study for our fellow educational developers and that the lessons we’ve learned are of use in this time of crisis.

Biographies

Tazin Daniels, PhD is an Assistant Director at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan and holds a doctorate in Anthropology. She is an educational developer, consultant, and coach who specializes in strategies for equitable online teaching and preparing the next generation of inclusive educators. She has been published in *Teaching Anthropology* and *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*.

Elizabeth Bailey, PhD is an Instructional Consultant at the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching in Engineering at the University of Michigan. She leads programs to prepare graduate students for success in faculty roles and to support new faculty at the College of Engineering. Dr. Bailey earned a PhD in Chemistry at Columbia University in 2019. Her work on supporting teaching faculty has been published in the American Society for Engineering Education conference proceedings.

Anoff Nicholas Cobblah is a First-Year Writing Instructor and PhD Candidate for the Department of English Language & Literature at the University of Michigan. His primary research is on nineteenth-century British literature, focusing particularly on the intersections of literature, science, and technology.

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