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Anita Whiting

Clayton State University, awhiting@clayton.edu

Joie S. Hain

Clayton State University, joiehain@clayton.edu

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Student Perspectives on Mandatory Conversion to Online Classes: A Qualitative Study

Anita Whiting, Clayton State University, awhiting@clayton.edu
Joie S. Hain, Clayton State University, joiehain@clayton.edu

Abstract — This qualitative research study investigates students' perspectives on the mandatory conversion to online classes due to COVID-19. In particular, this study explores (1) students' struggles with conversion of class to online, (2) students' likes of converted online class, (3) students' dislikes of converted online class, (4) students' happiness toward converted online classes, and (5) students' recommendations on ways to improve online classes. The study was conducted at three universities in the southeastern region of the United States. The major findings of the study are (1) almost 80 percent of students reported struggles when class was converted to online, (2) 88 percent of students reported dislikes about class being converted to online, and (3) 86 percent of students were happier when class met on campus. The top three struggles for students in converted to online classes were learning course materials, time management, and adjusting to changes in the course. The top three dislikes from students in converted to online classes were lack of interaction with professor and classmates, not being able to ask questions, and the course material was harder to learn online. Students did report some likes about class being converted to online such as more convenient, more flexible, responsive instructors, more time, and savings on gas and transportation costs. Overall, the research study found both positive and negative reactions from students when their classes were converted to online.

Keywords — COVID-19, online classes, students' feelings, students' perspectives, qualitative study, college students, remote learning, distance learning, business students

Introduction

COVID-19 and the mandatory conversion to online classes caused the world's largest educational experiment in online learning (Day et al., 2021). Lockdown and social distancing measures due to COVID-19 led to the closure of higher education institutions around the world. By July of 2020, over 98.6 percent of learners worldwide had been impacted by the pandemic (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). This immediate and mandatory conversion to online classes created an unprecedented and unwanted change from traditional face-to-face classes to online classes (LeBlanc, 2020). Students and educators were forced to transition to online classes with little or no other alternatives available (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

Despite this worldwide phenomenon and paradigm shift to online learning, there is little research on how students "felt" when universities and instructors switched to remote instruction (Pagoto et al., 2021). Previous studies have quantitatively explored the effects on students when converting to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma et al., 2021; Whiting et al., 2021) but research detailing students' experiences and perspectives on converted classes is limited

(Aucejo et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020). Therefore, this study addresses this gap in the literature and explores how the abrupt conversion to online classes impacted students' feelings and experiences. In particular, this study explores (1) students' struggles with conversion of classes to online, (2) students' likes of converted online classes, (3) students' dislikes of converted online classes, (4) students' happiness toward converted online classes, and (5) students' ideas on ways to improve online classes.

This paper begins by summarizing the literature on COVID-19 and higher education. Next, the paper describes the qualitative methodology, data collection, and data analysis. Third, the paper presents the findings and results of the study. Fourth, the paper discusses the implications and conclusions of the paper. Last, the paper provides the contributions of this study to educators and researchers.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic created the largest disruption of educational systems in human history (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Within a short period of time, hundreds of thousands of college students were told to clear out their belongings and head home (Carey, 2020). Universities across the globe switched to emergency online instruction (Pagoto et al., 2021). Approximately 1.2 billion students from 194 countries became remote learners in April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Over 1,100 colleges and universities in the United States cancelled their in-person classes and shifted to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2020). This paradigm shift to online learning led to the "largest unplanned educational experiment ever undertaken" (Day et al., 2021), with higher education being "rocked" by COVID-19.

While converting on-campus classes to online was promoted as an efficient way of minimizing the spread of COVID-19, it also produced many student challenges (Cao et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020). Blankenberger and Williams (2020) share that "Policymakers and those in higher education need to plan for the possible ramifications of this catastrophic event" (p. 404). Additionally, higher education institutions work in trust with its students and must be ready to meet the needs of its students with the exponential growth of online learning (Blankenberger and Williams 2020).

Previous studies have quantitatively explored the effects on students when converting to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sharma et al., 2021; Whiting et al., 2021). Additional research has covered quantitatively successful course transitions with innovative pedagogical processes (Biswas et al., 2021). Challenges that were experienced by college students included anxiety (Akcil and Batas, 2021), depression (Schmits et al., 2021), future uncertainty concerns (Hawley et al., 2021), internet and connection issues (Tigaa and Sonawane, 2020), a lack of appropriate devices for online work, both hardware and video software, and for many a lack of a quiet, dedicated study place (Day et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Detrimental impacts on students included a perception of the decline in the effectiveness of their education when converted to online classes (Harvard Business Publishing Education, 2020). A priori research also reflects that classes were less enjoyable, less interesting and had less learning value with less attention post conversion (Garris and Fleck, 2020). Overall satisfaction declined after classes converted from on-campus to online (Kaur et al., 2020). Further results indicate declining engagement with the university, declining engagement with the college, declining engagement with the professor, declining engagement with other students with an overall result of a decline in

the enjoyment of the converted online classes (Whiting et al., 2021).

Positive effects on students have been reported. Higher student attendance was reported for online classes (Shenoy et al., 2020). Students reported better understanding of the class material because classes were recorded and could be replayed (Kaur et al., 2020). Students liked the flexibility that online classes provided (Garris and Fleck 2020) and students reported they were satisfied with support provided by professors as they transitioned to online classes (Day et al., 2021).

Minimal qualitative research has been conducted to understand the impact on undergraduate students. Studies performed have been conducted at the graduate level and utilized small samples (Damast et al., 2021; Kutlu and Titrek, 2021) with several studying the impact of distance learning for medical students (Ahmed et al., 2020; Erin et al., 2021). Ang et al. (2021) conducted a small qualitative study of twenty-seven students researching undergraduate student resilience. Additional research for STEM students focused on six specific topics (Pagoto et al., 2021) but did not focus on the students' feelings. Only a few COVID-19 studies included student samples from more than one university (Aristovnik et al., 2020) as well as limited research on how students felt about their classes being converted to an online format (Cao et al., 2020).

Due to the limited qualitative research on student perspectives on the conversion of classes to online, this research study seeks to address this gap in the literature by conducting a larger qualitative study with a broader and more diversified student population and by focusing on students' feelings, perspectives and reactions from converted to online classes. In particular, this study looks at (1) students' struggles, (2) students' likes with converted class, (3) students' dislikes with converted class, (4) students' happiness with converted class, and (5) student recommendations on way to improve online classes. This study attempts to describe and explain how students felt when their classes were converted to online.

Research Questions

The research questions below delineate the areas of focus for the study.

1. What did students' struggle with when classes were converted to on-line?
2. What were the students' likes about class being converted to on-line?
3. What were the students' dislikes about class being converted to on-line?
4. Were the students happier when their class was on-campus? Why or Why not?
5. What recommendations do students have for improving on-line classes?

Methodology and Data Collection

Qualitative surveys were collected from ten undergraduate business classes at three, southeastern universities in mid-April of 2020. Students were asked to complete an online survey and specifically think about one of their classes that had been converted from on campus to online due to COVID-19. Respondents were then asked to list the name of the class and answer the questions based on that particular class. The open ended questionnaire included questions about (a) struggles with converted class, (b) likes of converted class, (c) dislikes of converted class, (d) happiness with converted class, and (e) suggestions for improving online classes. The last set of questions

on the questionnaire were demographic questions such as gender, age, rank, university enrolled at, major, and ethnic background.

A total of 151 students participated in the qualitative survey. Approximately sixty-two percent of the respondents were female. The ages ranged from 19 to 74, with an average age of 26. Approximately fifty-two percent of respondents were African American. The survey was administered online by College of Business instructors. All students were surveyed during a business class in which they were enrolled.

Findings and Results

The qualitative responses were analyzed using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines. The analysis first began with repeated readings and sorting of comments into groups according to similarities. Next, the author developed a list of categories from repeated readings of responses to each question. After identifying categories, a team of two trained raters sorted data into categories, using definition checks to increase the reliability of the coding process (Gremler, 2004). This process was repeated for each of the five questions. Inter-judge agreement was 0.82 for R1, 0.86 for R2, 0.86 for R3, 0.81 for R4, and 0.80 for R5. Inter-judge reliability exceeded 0.80, the minimum recommended inter-judge reliability (Kassarjian, 1977). The results from these analyses produced typologies for each of the research five questions. The typologies for each research question will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

R1 - What did students struggle with when classes were converted to online?

Table 1 outlines the struggles that students experienced when one of their on-campus classes was converted to online. Approximately 79 percent of respondents indicated that they struggled when their class was converted to online. The largest struggle mentioned by students was learning course materials (12.7%). Many students said they struggled with learning certain concepts, understanding the material, learning math, understanding the lessons, and learning the steps to complete certain problems. The second largest struggle for students was time management (10.1%) tied with third, of adjusting to changes in the course (10.1%). Examples of students' comments about struggles with time management included making time to study, doing my work, carving out specific time to study, and doing assignments on time. In adjusting to the challenge of changes to course, students reported that they struggled with adjusting to the challenge of change, changes in tests and quizzes, changes in projects and assignments, and changes in due dates. The fourth largest struggle reported by students was remembering due dates (8.7%). Students commented that they struggled with keeping up with due dates, keeping up with deadlines, keeping up with test dates, and staying on track with schedule. One student commented that they missed their professor reminding the class about upcoming deadlines when the class met on campus. The fifth largest struggle was communicating with classmates (6.5%). Students commented that it was hard to get group members to answer email or team messages, hard to talk with group members, hard to get everyone's opinion on group project, and hard to work with group on group project.

Additional student struggles included staying focused (6.3%) and lack of motivation (5.9%). Over 4.4 percent of students said they struggled with "everything" in their converted to online class. Students also reported struggling with workload of classes (3.8%), study skills (3.8%), and not being able to ask questions such as during or after class (3.2%). The last struggle category was "other" (3.7%). Within the "other" category is interesting to note that only 1.8

percent of students said they struggled with their performance (grade) in their converted to online class and that only 1.2 percent of students said they struggled with mental health (anxiety, fear, etc.) issues when their class was converted to online. Only one student mentioned that they struggled with technical issues such as connection problems. This student was part of the “other” category.

The most surprising result from this study was that 20.8% of students reported that they did not struggle with anything in their converted to online class. Comments from students included “I haven’t struggled. Professor XYZ has been very proactive and helpful with any questions and has kept the class up to speed on all the material”, “I haven’t struggled. The schedule is regimented and my normal submission hasn’t been disrupted”, and “I have not really struggled with anything”. This large percentage of no struggles (or lack of struggles) may be attributed to the students’ experience with online classes or the instructors’ experience with online classes.

Table 1: Typology of Student Struggles

Student Struggles	Percentage
Harder to Learn Material	12.7%
Time Management	10.1%
Changes to Course	10.1%
Remembering Due Dates	8.7%
Communicating with Classmates	6.5%
Staying Focused	6.3%
Lack of Motivation	5.9%
Everything	4.4%
Workload of Class	3.8%
Study Skills	3.8%
Not Being Able to Ask Questions in Class	3.2%
Other	3.7%
No Struggles	20.8%

R2 – What did students like about their class being converted from on-campus to online?

Table 2 displays the items that students “liked” about their on-campus classes being converted to online. Despite the abrupt conversion to online there were many things that students did like about their class being converted to online. Over 82 percent of students provided likes about the class being converted to online. As shown in Table 2, the largest “like” about conversion to online was the convenience of the online class (25.7%). Students said that online class was a lot more convenient, that they enjoyed being able to learn from the comfort of their home, that they liked not having to get up early to go to class. They also mentioned that they liked not getting stuck in traffic on the way to class and that they liked not having to be on campus late at night.

The second largest “like” category was flexibility and freedom of online classes (23.3%). Students mentioned that they liked being able to work at their own pace and at their own schedule,

they liked the ability to work ahead, and they liked being able to move quickly on things that they understood rather than having to wait for other students to understand it. Students also mentioned that they liked having the ability to take their time on a concept.

The next category had a significant drop of over 16% points. The third largest “like” category was responsive and helpful instructors (7.2%). Students commented that teachers were still helpful when online, the professor responded quickly and still tried to help, and communication between professor and teacher increased.

The fourth largest “like” category from converted online class was having more time (5.4%). With the class conversion, students reported that they have more time to complete assignments, they have more time to do the things they need to do, and they have more time to dedicate to things they enjoy. Students commented that they saved time by not having to travel to campus.

The fifth and sixth largest “like” categories were transition to online was easy (4.2%) and they liked saving money on gas and transportation (4.2%). For the category of transition was easy, students commented that the transition to online was mild with not much changed, the change to online wasn't hard, they liked the change to online, the change was fine with them, and were able to transition easily. For saving on gas, students mentioned that they lived far away from campus and they saved a lot of money on gas when the class went online. Other students mentioned that they saved money on transportation costs such as saving on Uber and bus rides.

Additional student “likes” included the ability to replay lectures (3%) and the use of technology used (3%). Students mentioned that they liked using Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and breakout rooms. The broad category of “other” represented 6 percent of students' comments and included comments such as class was clear and well managed, class was well structured and things were easy to find, and ability to speak up in front of online class without feeling shy.

Some students did not have any likes when asked for likes about their class being converted to online (13.8%). Comments from students that did not have any likes for their converted classes included “I don't have a pro for this class being transitioned online”, “I don't like anything”, “I don't like online classes”, “I hate online instruction”, and “there is nothing to like as students are failing because of the transfer to online”. Another 4.2 percent of students reported they prefer on campus classes when asked about what they liked about their class being transitioned to online. Combining these two categories demonstrates that approximately 18% of students did not have any “likes” about their class being transitioned to online.

Table 2: Typology of Likes and Dislikes of Converted to Online Class

Likes

1. Convenient (25.7%)
2. Flexibility & Freedom (23.3%)
3. Instructors were helpful (7.2%)
4. Save time & have more time (5.4%)
5. Save on gas (4.2%)
6. Transition was easy (4.2%)
7. Ability to replay lectures (3.0%)
8. Use of technology (3.0%)
9. Other (6.0%)
10. No Likes (13.8%)
11. Prefer On-campus classes (4.2%)

Dislikes

1. Lack of interaction (30.6%)
 2. Not able to ask questions (13.0%)
 3. Harder to learn online (7.6%)
 4. Harder to keep up with deadlines (5.9%)
 5. Teaching self (5.3%)
 6. Increased workload (5.3%)
 7. Distractions at home (2.9%)
 8. Changes in course (2.4%)
 9. Everything (5.2%)
 10. Other (10.0%)
 11. No Dislikes (11.8%)
-

R3 – What did students dislike about their class being converted from on-campus to online?

Table 2 displays the students’ “dislikes” about their on-campus classes being converted to online. Students provided many varied dislikes about their classes being converted to online. Over 88.2% of students surveyed provided dislikes about the class being converted to online. The largest dislike about conversion to online was lack of interaction with professor and classmates (30.6%). Students reported that the online class feels more distant, they miss the discussions in class with students and professor, they miss the hands on experience, they don’t like the feel of the online class, and they prefer person to person interactions. One student mentioned that “they miss the face to face communication with the instructor and that Zoom just doesn’t do it for me”.

The second largest dislike about conversion to online was not being able to ask questions and get quick feedback (13.0%). Many students said they disliked not being able to get immediate answers to questions. One student said “I do not like having to wait delayed periods of time to hear responses to my questions. I would have instant feedback in an on-campus class”. Another student mentioned that questions about assignments take longer to get a response versus being in class and just doing it there. Another student mentioned that you can’t stay after class to talk to your professor about any problems you may need solved. Another student said they can’t ask real-time questions about something I don’t understand.

The third largest dislike about conversion to online was class information was harder to learn (7.6%). Students commented that they had to study harder and longer to comprehend concepts and that it was more difficult to understand lessons taught online. Other students mentioned that they were not able to see and understand how to work out problems and that their PowerPoint slides didn’t have enough details and steps to for them to understand how the professor came up with the answer.

The fourth largest dislike about conversion to online was it was harder to keep up with class deadlines (5.9%). Students said they forgot when work was due and that the university's content management system assignment and quiz notifications weren't great. One student said that being in class made keeping track of assignments easier.

The fifth largest dislike about conversion to online was having to teach self (5.3%), tied with a perception of increased workload (5.3%). Students reported that they disliked having to "teach myself the material", disliked having to "teach myself difficult material", and dislike having to "teach myself a lot of the material". One student wrote "I hate that students are practically learning the subject themselves which requires no university". Comments from students about perception of increased workload were professors added work that wasn't on syllabus, professors added extra assignments, and professors added more work to class after it was converted to online.

Other dislikes noted were distractions at home (2.9%) and change in course requirements (2.4%) such as changes in exams and assignments. Five percent (5.2%) of students commented that they disliked "everything" about their converted to online class. The "other" category of dislikes accounted for ten percent of student responses and included items such as "just an adjustment", "felt like I was doing very well before things were converted to online", and "not enough information given in online class".

A surprising finding of this study was that 11.8 percent of students reported that they had no dislikes with their class being converted to online. One student said "I honestly enjoy online classes more than in person classes". Other comments from students included "there is nothing I don't like", "I liked everything about it", and "there was nothing not to like".

R4 – Were students happier when this class was on campus? Why or Why not?

Analysis of students' responses to the question of "were you happier when this class met on campus" resulted in 75.6% of students being happier when their class was on campus. Twelve (12.5%) percent of students said they were not happier when their class on campus while almost another twelve (11.9%) percent of students said they were neutral and did not have a preference.

Table 3 reflects that students who were happier when class was on campus state the following reasons: (1) there was more interaction with classmates and professor on campus (25.0%), (2) they learn better on campus (22.7%), (3) they were able to get help and ask questions on campus (12.5%), (4) they enjoy class lectures and discussions on campus (10.2%), (5) they are more focused and productive on campus (7%), and (6) they prefer on campus classes (7%). Cumulative "Other" reasons accounted for 15.6% of response for those who were happier when class was on campus. Other reasons included comments such as on campus classes feel more like school, I paid for an in-person class because of the difficulty of the class, I chose in-class instruction vs online instruction for a reason.

Students who were not happier on campus but were happier online, stated the following reasons: (1) online class is more convenient (26.1%), (2) class feels the same (21.7%), (3) prefer online classes (17.4%), and (4) performed better when online (13.1%). Other reasons represented 21.7 percent of those respondents who were not happier on campus and included comments such as teacher didn't make class exciting when it was on-campus, group members communicate more now that it is online, and I had originally wanted all my classes to be online.

Students who were neutral about class being on campus or online provided the following comments: (1) "Yes and no. It made it easier to not have to make the drive there and back but it

took away from interacting with the class”, (2) “I didn’t like having to wake up and get dressed but I like living on campus more”. (3) “It is always good to interact with fellow students and attend Dr. XYZ’s lectures. Despite that, I can follow the class from home very well”. Other student comments included “50/50” and “neutral”.

Overall, most students were happier when their class met on campus. However, a surprising 12.5% of students said they were not happier when their class met on campus and a surprising 11.9% of students were neutral.

Table 3: Typology of Why Happier On Campus and Why Happier Online

Why Happier On-Campus	Why Happier Online
1. More interaction with classmates & professor (25.0%)	1. More convenient (26.1%)
2. Learn better on campus (22.7%)	2. Class feels the same (21.7%)
3. Able to get help & ask questions (12.5%)	3. Prefer online class (17.4%)
4. Enjoy class lectures & discussions (10.2%)	4. Perform better online (13.1%)
5. More focused & productive on campus (7.0%)	5. Other (21.7%)
6. Prefer On-campus classes (7.0%)	
7. Other (15.6%)	

R5 – What suggestions do students have for improving online classes?

Table 4 displays students’ recommendations for improving online classes. Over sixty six percent of the students provided recommendations for improving online classes, while almost thirty four percent had no suggestions. The number one recommendation from students was to increase communication with students (12.7%). Examples of recommendations on increasing communication with students were send out reminders about assignments, set up reminders on content management system, provide more instructions about assignments, and make sure professors respond to student emails in a timely fashion. The second major suggestion was to add live class sessions (7.9%). Students suggested having mandatory class meetings on teams, covering class material via lectures on teams, and having online lectures where students could type in questions. The third largest suggestion was to add recorded videos or lectures (6.6%). In particular, students recommended having videos of the professor going over material and problems, professors providing more instructional videos, and professors providing recorded PowerPoint lectures via video. The fourth largest suggestion was to add additional live sessions (5.3%) such as group discussions in break out rooms, tutoring sessions via Zoom, question and answer (Q&A) sessions, and review sessions.

Additional recommendations from students included increase interactions among classmates (4%), decrease workload (3.3%), add extra credit opportunities (2.6%), remove group assignments (2%), and add more opportunities to practice material (2%). Respondents also provided many “other” recommendations (19.8%) such as adding calendar pings to phones of

assignment dates, adding class agendas and sticking to them, providing all course materials on content management system weeks before it is due, and providing detailed instructions on assignments and projects.

An interesting finding from this research question was that 33.8% of respondents had no suggestions for improvement. Examples of their answers included “it’s good”, “this online class is the best it can be”, “class is already okay”, and “I have no complaints on the way this class is being offered online”.

Overall, students provided many recommendations about ways to improve online classes.

Table 4: Typology of Recommendations for Improving Online Classes

Student Recommendations	Percentage
Increase Communications with Students	12.7%
Add Live Class Sessions	7.9%
Add Recorded Videos	6.6%
Add Additional Live Sessions	5.3%
Increase Interactions among Classmates	4.0%
Decrease Workload	3.3%
Add Extra Credit Opportunities	2.6%
Remove Group Assignments	2.0%
Add Opportunities to Practice Material	2.0%
Other	19.8%
No Suggestions	33.8%

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore students’ feelings, perspectives, and experiences with the mandatory conversion of classes to online. In particular, this study set out to explore students’ struggles with converting their class to online, students’ likes about converted class, students’ dislikes about converted class, students’ feelings of happiness or lack of happiness with converted class, and student suggestions on what could be added or improved upon in online classes. This study addresses a gap in the literature by providing a better and more comprehensive understanding of how students felt and reacted when their classes were converted to online. Using qualitative techniques, this study provides a rich and descriptive look into how students felt and faired when their classes were converted to online. Overall, this research study found both positive and negative reactions from students when their classes were abruptly converted to online.

The major findings of the study are:

- Approximately 80 percent of students reported struggles when their classes were converted to online. The top five struggles reported were learning course materials, time management, adjusting to changes in course, remembering due dates and staying focused.

Only two percent of students reported that they struggled with their performance in the converted class.

- There were many dislikes from students about course being converted to online. Over 88 percent of student reported dislikes about the conversion to online. The top dislikes were lack of interaction with professor and classmates, not being able to ask questions and get quick feedback, course information was harder to learn, harder to keep up with class deadlines, having to teach self, and increased class workload.
- Converting of classes to online was not all bad. There were many likes from students about class being converted to online. The top likes were convenience, flexibility and freedom with class, responsive and helpful instructors, having more time, and saving money on gas and transportation costs.
- Approximately 76 percent of students were happier when the class met on campus. Reasons for being happier on campus were interaction with professor and classmates, learn better on campus, able to get help and ask questions on campus, enjoying class lectures and discussions on campus, and more focused and productive on campus.
- Over 63 percent of students provided recommendations on ways to improve online classes. The top recommendations were increase communication with students, add live sessions, add recorded lectures, and add additional live sessions such as tutoring sessions, Q&A sessions and review sessions.

Contributions

This paper makes many contributions to the literature on online learning in higher education. First, this paper addresses a gap in literature by examining students' perspectives on converting classes to online. Second, this study provides qualitative findings on how students felt and responded when their classes when their classes were converted to online. This paper provides descriptive accounts of what students struggled with in a converted class, what students liked and disliked about a converted class, and why students were not happy when their classes were converted to online. Only a few studies have provided qualitative findings about the conversion to online and those studies predominately used graduate students in specific areas of study (Damast et al., 2021; Kutlu and Titrek, 2021). Third, this study provides a large and representative sample of undergraduate students from many different ethnic groups and from many different age groups. Thus, this study provides a more comprehensive perspective on how students were impacted when classes were converted. Fourth, this study provides typologies of students' struggles, likes, dislikes, and happiness with converted classes. Typologies are useful for scale development and advancing literature in a particular area (Rossiter, 2002). Fifth, this paper provides suggestions and recommendations to educators on how to improve online classes. Last, this paper adds to the literature on COVID-19, emergency response situations, student perspectives, and course modality.

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