# Successes and Challenges with Anti-Racist Community Building in Online Environments: Dual Pandemic Intersection

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This paper reports on a collective case study that examined a community of inquiry designed to help teachers address the challenges of enacting anti-racist pedagogy using virtual teaching practices in the wake of the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism. The following research questions guided this study: 1) What successes and challenges do teachers report when enacting anti-racist community building with students in online environments? 2) How does participation in an online professional learning community that cuts across the racial divide in St. Louis impact teachers? We used descriptive statistics along with open and a priori coding to analyze data from 29 participants, including pre and post surveys, focus group interviews, learning circle recordings, and participant-generated artifacts. Results are reported in relation to five themes: trust, vulnerability, awareness, accountability, and connection. We end by sharing implications of this study for supporting educators who work at all levels of education.
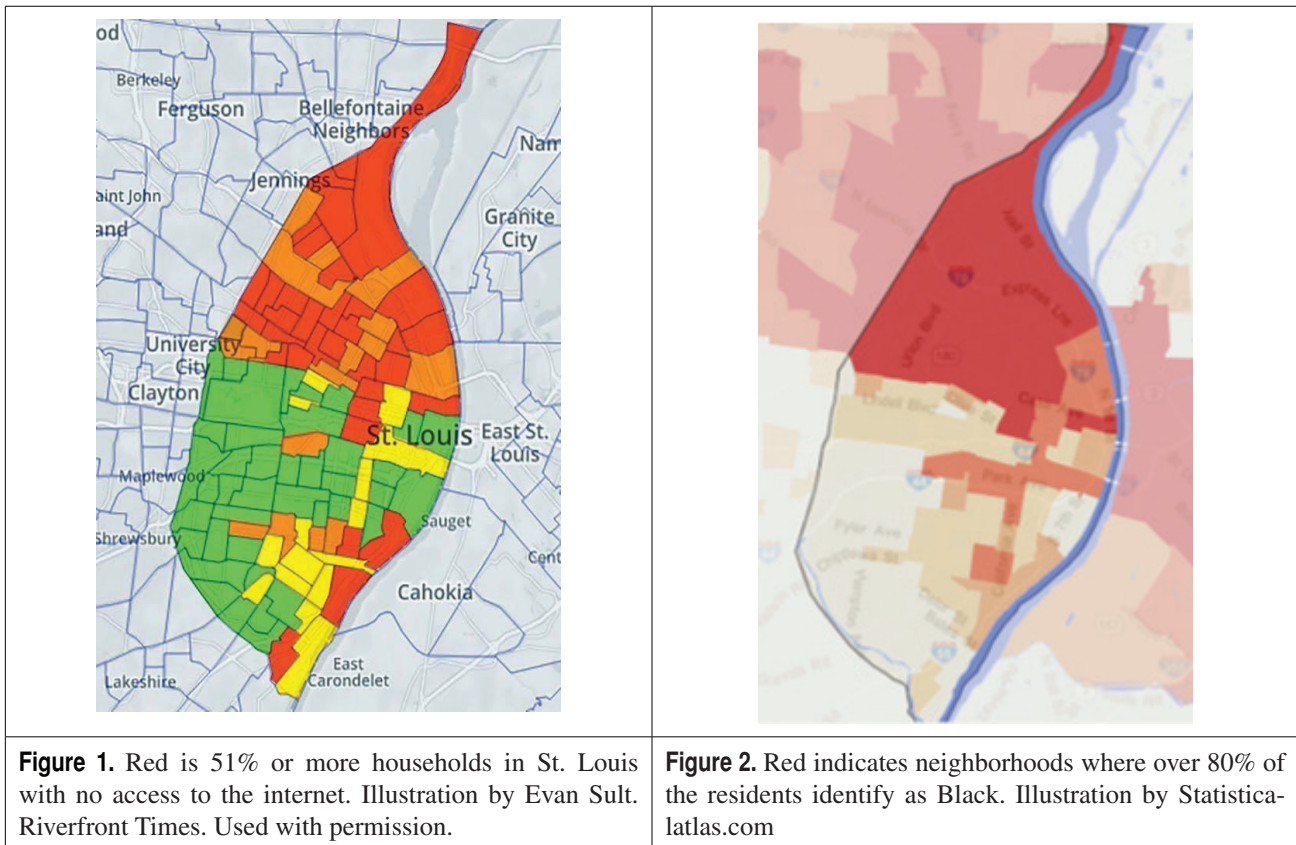
## HISTORICAL REVIEW

The spring of 2020 ushered in what has been referred to as dual pandemics (e.g., Jones, 2021). There was the global pandemic of COVID-19, which disproportionately impacted people of color. Then, the murder of George Floyd further highlighted a pandemic that has been festering for centuries - that of systemic racism (Silverstein, 2021). Our work before 2020 included multiple teacher inquiry communities focused on antiracism. When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit, we built a community of inquiry around global solidarity to help combat the racist undertones of xenophobia that were associated with COVID-19 (see Kerkhoff, 2020). Then, the racial health disparities of COVID-19 and the murder of George Floyd underscored the need to focus on systemic racism in our local communities to help teachers address the challenges of enacting antiracist pedagogy using virtual teaching practices.

Although the end of the 2019-2020 school year can be characterized as "emergency teaching," during the summer, educators began planning in earnest for virtual teaching to start the 2020-21 school year. In the St. Louis, Missouri area, districts moved to adopt various online learning management systems and trained teachers on their use. Some districts developed and distributed online curricular modules that teachers were required to use. However, even in the most prepared school districts, online platforms and pre-loaded learning modules could not alleviate two primary concerns of teachers returning to a changed classroom: 1) How will I build relationships and community with my students in a virtual

setting; and 2) How can I demonstrate my commitment to antiracist pedagogy and open up brave spaces (Aroa & Clemens, 2013) for critical conversations in a virtual setting? These concerns were exacerbated in communities marginalized by the digital and racial divides in St. Louis (see Figure 1).

In an effort to center the needs of historically marginalized people and prioritize educational equity, colleagues at the University of Missouri - St. Louis designed and implemented a free virtual professional learning series rooted in antiracism for teachers in our region whose schools could not afford to provide professional development (PD) or whose PD experiences were not from a framework of social justice. This project brought together STEM, literacy, and special education researchers to utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate building community in online learning. Our work was guided by the following research questions:

1. What successes and challenges do teachers report when enacting anti-racist community building with students in online environments?
2. How does participation in an online professional learning community that cuts across the racial divide in St. Louis impact teachers?



**Figure 1.** Red is 51% or more households in St. Louis with no access to the internet. Illustration by Evan Sult. Riverfront Times. Used with permission.

**Figure 2.** Red indicates neighborhoods where over 80% of the residents identify as Black. Illustration by Statistica-latlas.com

## METHODS

This study is a collective case study (Stake, 2000) with teachers from diverse schools in the greater St. Louis area who participated in virtual professional learning. The PD began in September 2020 with four, 90-minute workshops focused on building community in online spaces. The PD included whole-group interactive sessions, discipline-focused breakout sessions, and design time where participants could engage in applying their learning to instructional design. From there, interested teachers were invited to engage in continued inquiry circles in which participants attended ten weekly, 60-minute synchronous Zoom sessions from October-December, 2020. The session titles for each week show the progression of topics and are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**
Session Topics and Progression

| Session | Topic |
|---------|-------|
| Session 1 | Start with the basics: Getting to know your students |
| Session 2 | Redefining participation: Getting each student involved and engaged |
| Session 3 | Vulnerability: Leading difficult discussions |
| Session 4 | Using student interests to guide our teaching |
| Session 5 | Teaching Accountability: Understanding the impact of our actions and word choices |
| Session 6 | Honor the Healing |
| Session 7 | Building Cultural Awareness: Exposing students to perspectives and experiences different from their own |
| Session 8 | Practicing self-care in a culture that expects teachers to self-sacrifice |
| Session 9 | Positioning students as experts |
| Session 10 | Let's Celebrate: Creating meaningful celebrations in online environments |

## Participants

The initial professional learning series drew over 75 area teachers. Twenty-nine of those teachers continued with the inquiry circles that focused on an explicitly anti-racist stance to building community in online spaces, allowing teachers to (1) build supportive professional networks and (2) build community with their own students. These teachers were invited to be study participants. As shown in Table 2, participant demographics largely mirrored the demographics of the national teaching force with the largest percentage being white teachers who identify as female; however, there was representation across race, gender and role.

**Table 2**
Participants' Demographic Data

| Characteristics | | Frequency | Percentages |
|-----------------|---|-----------|-------------|
| **Race** | Asian | 1 | 4% |
| | Black | 5 | 16% |
| | Hispanic | 1 | 4% |
| | White | 22 | 76% |
| **Gender** | Female | 25 | 86% |
| | Male | 4 | 14% |
| **Role** | Administrator | 1 | 4% |
| | Teachers | 18 | 62% |
| | University Faculty | 6 | 21% |
| | University Students | 5 | 17% |

**Data Collection & Analysis**

Data sources included pre and post surveys, focus group interviews, learning circle recordings, and participant-generated artifacts. The pre survey included questions about participants demographics, items from the Online Teaching Self-Efficacy Scale with Likert response (Gosselin, 2009), and open-response questions about participants' knowledge of online teaching practices and goals for their professional learning. Post surveys were collected in order to measure the effectiveness of the series and included Likert Scale items as well as open-response questions to help answer the research questions.

Likert scale items on the pre and post surveys were analyzed with descriptive statistics. Sessions were transcribed and analyzed first through direct interpretation in each individual instance and then through aggregation of instances across sessions and participants (Stake, 2000). We analyzed data using open and a priori coding (Saldaña, 2021) looking for patterns to develop themes of teachers' perspectives on building community online with their peers and classes in ways that are specific to their context. Artifacts were coded based on themes developed from the other data sources.

## RESULTS

### *What successes and challenges do teachers report when enacting anti-racist community building with K-12 students in online environments during COVID-19?*

Understandably so, teachers seemed to find it challenging to transfer what they understood to be good and equitable teaching to an online environment. Though they all reported various levels of success with each of the major categories this study addresses (i.e., trust, vulnerability, awareness, accountability, and connection), they were also seeking ideas and resources for cultivating these in an online environment with students.

Most of the teachers' big questions in the pre-survey revolved around how to foster environments in which students could build and engage in community with their classmates in an online space that was representative of and accessible to all students. Teachers wondered about how to structure time online for students to get to know one another, how to model vulnerability to gain trust, and how to help students and themselves remain their authentic selves and have important (even if controversial) conversations in an environment that easily lends itself to being recorded and shared, and has been increasingly legislated (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

In the post-survey, teachers shared successes in building trust, cultural awareness, and accountability for learning among students through sharing vulnerability and forging students' connections with the teacher, other students, and the curriculum. Teachers shared that they had success in implementing technical tools and resources that they learned in the program to help build relationships with students and help attend to students' emotional and social needs. Data is displayed in Table 3.

### *How does participation in an online professional learning community that cuts across the racial divide in St. Louis impact teachers during COVID-19?*

Teachers who participated in this study hoped to build and be part of a community of teachers who were working to learn how to teach in inclusive ways in a digital environment during an especially challenging cultural moment. Teachers reported enjoying the opportunity to build community with one another while learning practical tools and approaches to help students build supportive communities in their classrooms.

Post survey data indicates that, after being in online discussion spaces where they could participate in instruction modeled as an example of how they could do this work in their own classrooms, teachers were much more confident in their abilities to create engaging online classrooms that were reflective and inclusive of diverse identities as well as to engage students in engaging and meaningful discussions around difficult topics.

On the overlapping items from the two surveys, participants reported a confidence increase of up to two points on the scale. Table 4 displays comparisons of pre and post survey results, though our design does not allow for causation explanations of the data.

**Table 3**

Participant Data on Successes

| Theme | Quotes from Participants |
|---|---|
| Trust | This helped me to realize I can rely on my kids to be experts too. I do not have to be in control of every single moment or action to allow my students to learn what I hoped they would. Sharing control gives kids true ownership of their learning. |
| Awareness | Specifically the school gave us a pile of texts to choose from for our homerooms and told us to choose three. The goal I had was to choose the texts that the students could relate to of course. Yet I found one particular text (on the hijab) that just one student could relate to. At first glance I bypassed it because not all or majority of students could relate. Then I thought about the one student and thought that she would be so ecstatic to see herself in the curriculum and remembering that representation is not just about the majority. |
| | It is not just a student can see themselves but also so that other students can see them too. |
| Accountability | Making sure to start discussions with group norms. |
| | I was able to give students roles - moderator, chat monitor, expert, novice, etc. and it really made a difference for some kids and the engagement in class. |
| Vulnerability | I notice the vulnerability of the group members and the facilitators. It led to powerful and engaging discussions. I carried that into the online class. I check whether students are emotionally ok before moving into academics. This is new for me. |
| | I learned about the importance of following up with a student individually after a difficult conversation or microaggression. |
| Connection | Finding ways to help understand students in these unusual times and to help them understand each other. |
| | Connecting during discussions and helping students to be willing to share out. I can't say that all of my students are comfortable taking risks, but I have had more students willing here recently to open up during conversation when they haven't been confident. |
| | I learned so much about creating a community when I am further than 6 feet apart as well as tools/techniques/ in order to create more discussions and sharing ideas in my classroom. |
| Implementing digital tools and opening virtual spaces for relational and social learning. | I have learned so much from you all and I have been able to apply what we have discussed to both my work with teachers as well as to my own online classes. I learned about really practical technical tools (such as whiteboardfi.com) and organizing tips (group roles in discussions and setting group norms). But I have also been inspired to consider how I open up to my students and invite them to open up to me in ways that will lead to more meaningful learning and relationships. What an amazing experience. |
| | Using Padlet in an anonymous way after the election for students to share thoughts across classes, is not something I had ever considered doing before. It ended up being a great outlet for some students who just had a thought that needed to get into the world before the election was called. |
| | I shared this with one of our district's facilitators who has shared this with several teachers in the district. Here is a quote from our district newsletter. "Whiteboard.fi is amazing!" |
| | Designating students as chat monitors has helped me. I've also tried using (with some success) FlipGrid and Padlet. |
| | I implemented a discussion board in my online class and it was successful. It grew our classroom community and it was fun to see students begin to respond to each other's posts. |

**Table 4**

| Pre-test Items | Pre Mean (*N*=29) | Pre SD | Post Mean (*N*=15) | Post SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ensure students from a variety of cultural backgrounds feel represented in online courses. | 2.93 | 0.92 | 4.20 | 0.56 |
| Get students to work together in online courses. | 2.48 | 0.95 | 4.00 | 0.53 |
| Promote student participation in my online classroom. | 2.90 | 0.98 | 4.20 | 0.41 |
| Create a sense of community in my online classroom through activities that help my students get to know each other more. | 2.93 | 1.07 | 4.27 | 0.70 |
| Create meaningful class discussions in an online environment. | 2.72 | 0.80 | 4.20 | 0.68 |

The themes of *trust, vulnerability, awareness, accountability, and connection* were revealed to be salient in regards to this research question also.

**Table 5**

| Theme | Quotes from Participants |
|---|---|
| Trust | I have enjoyed hearing other stories, disagreeing over personal philosophy, and building a community based on shared experience and trust especially in this time when teaching feels like an island. |
| Awareness | It was helpful to hear from other educators with a variety of backgrounds and experience to provide multiple examples and perspectives with ideas and support. |
| | I look at student representation with a different lens. Representation is not just about catering to the masses in the classroom. I tend to group students as a whole when looking at resources to implement in lessons. However, it is alright to use resources that just one student can connect or relate to. |
| Accountability | I tried new strategies that encouraged students to work together effectively and respectfully |
| Vulnerability | It was beautiful to experience the group becoming more open and vulnerable over the course of the program. |
| Connection | We are so focused on building communities for our students that we sometimes forget the importance of having our own communities. |
| | From the very first session, I've loved the collaborative nature of working with other teachers to find out what's working and what isn't when it comes to learning online. Discussions about sharing and empowering students' perspectives have helped shape an entire unit plan on Culture. I also liked sharing a virtual space with people in the same boat as me- especially as a first-year teacher with no background/training in education- it's been very impactful to hear and see how the pros do it! |

## IMPLICATIONS

The move to virtual teaching left many teachers underprepared and unmoored. Indeed, the ongoing staff shortages and increasing teacher burnout have over 55% of teachers considering leaving the field earlier than planned (Dabrowski, 2021; Walker, 2022) and few who are looking to join the field (Maxouris & Zdanowicz, 2022; Partelow, 2019). Although

the reasons for the growing teacher shortage are complex, there are implications of this study for supporting educators who work at all levels of education.

While most schools returned to in-person, face-to-face instruction at some point in 2021, we know that some of the pivots made during virtual teaching are here to stay. For example, educators report being able to communicate more easily with parents via Zoom, and there is opportunity to prevent disruptions to learning using digital platforms for virtual tutoring and instruction during emergency days (e.g. snow days). To better support teachers before they ever enter the field, teacher preparation programs need to work with preservice teachers to consider beneficial uses of technology for creating supportive classroom communities in equitable ways. These findings push teacher education to prepare teachers to use technology beyond community of inquiry (Garrison et al., 2010) to consider race, culture, and equity when teachers design ways for students to connect to the instructor, other students, and the content and beyond TPACK (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) to include pedagogical knowledge of digital platforms, tools, and methods for building a community of learners both locally and globally. In addition, our findings suggest that teachers need practice with virtual methods for social and emotional learning and culturally relevant teaching during their coursework and field experiences.

Regardless of the format for instruction, teachers are being thrust onto the frontlines of the culture wars. They need anti-racist, social justice-focused networks to help them navigate this tricky terrain. For in-service teachers, our findings suggest the need to create more professional networking spaces (either online or in-person) where teachers feel connected to each other, learn from each other, and realize they are not alone in the challenges they are facing. Given the exodus from the field of teaching, connections are needed more than ever, especially among teachers of color and those who work in schools with historically marginalized populations.

Although the conversations that took place during the learning circles were a clear source of support for our participants, these conversations must move beyond our localized virtual setting and into the realm of policymaking more widely. Further research is needed to point to solutions for policy makers who are willing to address the stark realities of inequity that were laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to fester as part of the systemic racism pandemic.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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