

Reading, Writing, and COVID: The Impacts of the Pandemic on One University's Business Students Reading and Writing Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

In January 2020, scenes online of pain and suffering in Chinese hospitals heralded a pandemic that would negatively impact not just people's health, but would hinder efforts by organizations worldwide, including the operations of almost all universities. In March 2020, colleges and universities moved learning to virtual delivery and canceled on-campus activities with little or no advance warning due to the threat posed by the coronavirus. Students and faculty alike had to adapt to the new reality of forced distance education, isolation and an uncertain future in the wake of COVID-19. As might be expected, student learning took a hit in many ways, but the pandemic also brought about changes in students' learning behaviors. This article investigates the impact of a stay-at-home order in one state on the reading and writing activities of students due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers surveyed over 600 students at a large, regional university in the Southeastern United States to specifically examine how the onset of the pandemic impacted how much more they engaged in reading and writing activities due to the changes ushered in, both in their college classes and in their lives, due to COVID-19.

Keywords: Books, COVID-19, Learning Behaviors, Reading, Students, Survey, Writing

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I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 began its spread in January 2020 across Asia and Europe, and the virus made its way westward to the Americas in an amazingly short period of time (Taylor, 2021). As the coronavirus spread, political leaders began issuing stay-at-home orders resulting in the shuttering of businesses, government offices, schools and other operations across the world (Mervosh, *et al.*, 2020). Universities, and indeed all of education, found themselves on the front line in efforts to "stop the spread" of the virus. As such, their operations were severely limited, and yet, higher education - and the teaching and learning that goes on in the college environment - was expected to continue via distance technologies (Tam & El-Azar, 2020).

John Bel Edwards, the Governor of Louisiana, became the ninth U.S. governor to issue stay-at-home orders impacting employees in the state, except for those who were deemed as "essential workers" (Governor's Order, 2020). The result was that most employees (and students) rushed home to face an unknown and quickly changing situation. The need for the order by the state's governor met little dissension because at the time, Louisiana was exhibiting the fastest growth rate of virus spread (Ballard & Karlin 2020) in the U.S. Besides moving students to distance learning

activities, the state's residents were encouraged to stay home, except in cases deemed critical, as in acquiring groceries and needed medicines, and social distancing was encouraged as well (Governor's Order, 2020).

Impacts on traditional education, retailing, and society in general would prove to be numerous. For instance, while certain types of crime may have decreased, cases of domestic violence increased (Levenson, 2021). Ostensibly, domestic violence increased due to the fact that victims were isolated in closer proximity to their abusers for longer periods of time. Also, homicides soared in major cities: increasing 50% in Chicago, 30% in Los Angeles and 40% in New York (Corley, 2021). The stress of the pandemic permeated much of life on the planet.

Changes in shopping behavior were noted (Budden, *et al.*, 2021) and the closures of numerous retailers, often referred to as the retail apocalypse (Wyld, *et al.*, 2021), continued unabated as shoppers shunned brick and mortar stores and moved online. Sadly, the closing of more than 97,000 stores by the end of August 2020, indicates the challenges that many faced (Yelp, 2020; Sraders & Lambert, 2020), and continue to face. Even shoppers' payment methods were impacted, as Evans (2020) reported an 85% increase in the use of Apple Pay and a 90% increase in the use of "buy now, pay later" contracts.

II. LEARNING BEHAVIOR DOES NOT OPERATE IN A VACUUM

Changes in the wider environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated changes in the learning environment and increased the use of distanced-based education which impacted learning. The negative impacts of the pandemic on the learning process have been noted in all levels of education. For instance, a study found that K-12 students fell behind – five months on average in mathematics and four months behind in reading - during the pandemic (Dorn, *et al.*, 2021). The question arises, if K-12 students fell behind in reading due to the pandemic, what impact has the pandemic had on the reading and writing of college students.

In March 2020, as one mid-sized regional university in the southeastern U.S. quickly moved students off-campus and transitioned to online classes, student behaviors were impacted. Restrictions on travel, socialization, dating, shopping and other activities caused changes in the behaviors of students. Changes in reading and writing as perceived by those impacted is the focus of the current study. Two surveys of students facing new educational, social and economic realities provided the data for this study. Some of the findings were as expected, while others were quite surprising.

III. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a game changer for many. Distance education, while increasingly utilized prior to the pandemic, took on greater importance as colleges and universities transitioned their in-person classes to an online format. The widespread movement to online educational delivery has been applauded by some and disparaged by others. Many students have filed lawsuits against universities seeking recompense for failing to receive what they expected (Davis, 2020). The concern in the suits is whether or not the move to online delivery resulting in an absence of social interaction and campus life, was one that met the academic quality expectations and experiences paid for by students.

Here it is two years later in early 2022, and, for better or worse, many students are still wearing masks, social distancing and in general, not living the lives they lived pre-COVID. At the same time, as this is being written, most universities have reopened their campuses and are trying to return to an environment as “normal” as possible, considering mask mandates and other pandemic-related expectations continue, albeit to a lesser degree.

The overall concern here is this: What impacts on students’ reading and writing – if any – are resulting from the stay-at-home order? A slate of five primary objectives were developed and used as the basis for a questionnaire aimed at determining stay-at-home order impacts on the behavior of students attending a university in the southeast U.S. The study methodology and the questionnaire were pre-approved by the University’s Internal Review Board. The surveys, to ascertain the impacts of the pandemic on student behavior were conducted to coincide with the end of the Spring Semester 2020, approximately seven weeks after

Louisiana’s stay-at-home order was implemented, and then again at the end of the next (Fall) Semester 2020.

The specific objectives of the present study to assess the impact of the stay-at-home order, over time and include:

1. To investigate the impact of the order on student usage of the library.
2. To investigate the impact of the order on the reading of books.
3. To determine the impact of the order on the amount of writing students were doing.
4. To assess the impact of the order on the amount of reading students were doing.
5. To determine the impact of the order on the amount of time students spent reading.

In the second week of May 2020, a questionnaire was administered to measure perceived impacts of the order on students’ reading and writing behaviors. The timing was approximately seven weeks after the order. A survey was administered online via Survey Monkey to a selection of eight business classes whose business faculty had agreed to participate. Similarly, at the end of the Fall Semester 2020, the questionnaire was again administered to a sample of students. It should be noted that both of these surveys were accomplished while students were off-campus (taking classes 100% remotely).

Recipients enrolled in more than one of the selected classes were asked to answer only one questionnaire to prevent duplication. A total of 632 usable questionnaires (294 in the Spring 2020 semester, 338 in the Fall 2020 semester) were returned for analysis.

IV. FINDINGS

Our findings are broken down in relation to the following categories:

- Objective #1: Use of the University Library
- Objective #2: Book Reading Activity
- Objective #3: Writing Activity
- Objective #4: Amount of Time Spent Reading
- Objective #5: Amount of Material Read.

A. Objective #1: Use of the University Library

Objective #1 was to investigate the reported impact of the order over time, on student usage of the university’s library. It was expected the move to off-campus would increase the use of the library (at least online use of the library). The question concerning the amount of time using the campus library had three possible choices. The questionnaire asked students to indicate whether or not they were using the library more, the same amount, or less, since the move to off-campus.

Surprisingly, as can be seen in Table I: Use of the Library, only small percentages of each survey’s respondents indicated they were actually using the library more. In Spring 2020, 3.8% of students indicated they had increased the use of the library since the stay-at-home order was issued. In Fall 2020, the percentage had only increased to 5.6%. In that same Spring 2020 semester, 212 students (72.9%) reported using the library less, while 240 of their

Fall 2020 semester counterparts (71%) reported using the library less. Similar percentages (23.4%) of respondents from each survey indicated they were using the library the same amount as before the order. A chi-square test found no significant differences between the two semesters' groups. Few students reported an increased use of the library after the onset of COVID-19.

TABLE I: USE OF THE LIBRARY

Semester	More Use	The Same Amount	Less Use
Spring 2020	11 (3.8%)	68 (23.4%)	212 (72.9%)
Fall 2020	19 (4.8%)	79 (23.4%)	240 (71.0%)

*N (%)

B. Objective #2: Book Reading Activity

Objective #2 was to determine the impact of the order over time, on the reading of books. As can be seen below in Table II (Reading Books), the choices of reading - more, less or the same amount - indicated an increase in students' likelihood to engage in the reading of books. More than one-fifth (21.2% and 25.7% Spring and Fall 2020 semesters, respectively) of both groups of respondents indicated they were reading books more. This may have been due to the fact that distance delivery of education placed a greater responsibility on students to learn on their own compared to in-class delivery. A slightly lower percentage of students (19.5% and 17.5%) indicated they were reading books less. More than 50% of both groups indicated they were reading books the same amount as before the pandemic. A chi-square test indicated no significant difference between the groups' responses.

TABLE II: READING BOOKS

Semester	More Reading	The Same Amount	Less Reading
Spring 2020	62 (21.2%)	173 (59.2%)	57 (19.5%)
Fall 2020	87 (25.7%)	192 (56.8%)	59 (17.5%)

*N (%)

C. Objective #3: Writing Activity

Objective #3 was designed to assess the amount of writing students were engaged in over time, after the stay-at-home order was issued in March 2020.

Students could select four choices for describing the amount of their writing after the order: decreased, stayed the same, increased and not applicable. As can be seen in Table III (Amount of Writing), approximately the same percentage (23.5% vs. 22.7%) in each group indicated their writing efforts had decreased. At the same time, 24.2% in the Spring 2020 semester and 21.5% in Fall 2020 indicated they had increased the amount of writing since the stay-at-home order was issued.

As one might expect given the close percentages in the survey results, the Pearson Chi-square statistic (.673) reveals no significant differences between the responses to the Spring and Fall 2020 semesters' surveys.

TABLE III: AMOUNT OF WRITING

Semester	Decreased Writing	The Same Amount	Increased Writing
Spring 2020	67 (23.5%)	136 (47.7%)	69 (24.2%)
Fall 2020	76 (22.7%)	175 (52.2%)	72 (21.5%)

*N (%); "NOT APPLICABLE" HAS BEEN REMOVED

D. Objective #4: Amount of Time Spent Reading

Objective #4 was to determine the impact of the order over time, on the amount of time in which students were engaged in reading after the order.

Choices for this question that students could select were the same as in Objective #3 - decreased, stayed the same, increased and not applicable. As can be seen below in Table IV (Amount of Reading), the findings between the two groups were very similar, as 10.2% (Spring 2020) and 9.9% (Fall 2020) indicated the amount of reading that they were engaged in had decreased. Nearly identical percentages of students (29.1% in Spring 2020 vs 29.0% in Fall 2020) indicated that their reading had increased during each semester. At the same time, of the respondents, 56.1% (Spring 2020) and 56.4% (Fall 2020) indicated their reading had stayed the same. The .998 chi-square test statistic indicated the responses levels were amazingly similar between the groups.

TABLE IV: AMOUNT OF READING

Semester	Decreased Amount of Reading	The Same Amount	Increased Amount of Reading
Spring 2020	29 (10.2%)	160 (56.1%)	83 (29.1%)
Fall 2020	33 (9.9%)	189 (56.4%)	97 (29.0%)

*N (%); "NOT APPLICABLE" HAS BEEN REMOVED

E. Objective #5: Amount of Material Read

Objective #5 was to determine the impact over time, on the amount of time students spent reading after the order. The "amount of reading" and the "amount of time spent reading" are two different things. One purports to measure the amount (volume) of material read, while the other is indicative of the amount of time students spent reading.

TABLE IV: TIME SPENT READING

Semester	Decreased Reading Time	The Same Amount	Increased Reading Time
Spring 2020	29 (10.2%)	158 (55.4%)	87 (30.5%)
Fall 2020	34 (10.1%)	195 (58.2%)	90 (26.9%)

*N (%); "NOT APPLICABLE" HAS BEEN REMOVED

As can be seen in Table V (Time Spent Reading) above, of the Spring 2020 respondents, 30.5% reported they spent more time reading after the stay-at-home order was issued. In Fall 2020, the percentage of those reading more was slightly less than Spring 2020 (26.9%). Similar percentages (10.2% vs 10.1%; Spring and Fall 2020, respectively) reported spending less time reading after the order than

before. Again, as one might surmise given the closeness of these percentages, a chi-square test revealed no significant differences between the Spring and Fall 2020 responses to the question.

V. SUMMARY

Students reported using the library less after the stay-at-home order moved them to distance delivery of education. This finding could be from a misunderstanding as to what library usage means. Students may have interpreted the use of the library as being on-site as opposed to using it online. In any event, students reported using the library less.

At the same time, more than one-fifth of respondents indicated they were reading books more after the order. An increase in the reading of books may be expected due to the inherent difficulties of on-line delivery. However, and surprisingly, approximately one in five respondents reported reading books less after the move off-campus.

Perplexing was the finding that almost as many students reported writing more after the order as writing less after the order. Again, as learning moved online, one might have expected more writing assignments than before the order.

The amount of reading by respondents decreased for about one-tenth of the respondents in both surveys. Approximately 29% of respondents reported they had increased the amount of reading they were engaged in after the stay-at-home order.

Finally, the amount of time spent reading by respondents reportedly increased for many of the respondents. Approximately 30% of the Spring 2020 respondents reported reading more while 26.9% of Fall 2020 students reported spending more time reading.

As a final observation, more than 60% of both groups of respondents reported using social media more after the order than before. It seems the pandemic was good for social media providers, if not for reading and writing efforts of students.

The duration of educational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic remain to be seen. At this time, approximately 90% of colleges and schools have welcomed students back to campus (Moody, 2022). However, the appearance of new strains of the coronavirus, such as the Delta and Omicron variants, presents a continuing impediment to “normalcy” on college campuses (Burt, 2021). Thus, the need to monitor the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, and specifically on student learning behaviors and practices, is apparent. This means that further research in the same vein should be of continuing interest to everyone across the higher education landscape, both now and into the future.

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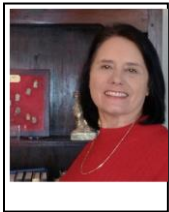


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