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The Synchronous Online Environment: Impact on Instructor's Academic Empathy

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Abstract- The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a new era of pedagogical strategies and offered a unique window into students' lives. Among the many challenges and advantages of the online environment, the daily exposure to students' lives—magnified during synchronous online teaching—served to humanize them in the classroom. This research delves into a novel area, exploring whether this heightened exposure to students' day-to-day environments outside of the physical classroom leads to academic empathy from their instructors and whether it results in a better understanding of students' individual challenges and circumstances. The results showed that synchronous instruction increased faculty members' empathy for students' diverse personal experiences. A significant discovery, however, was the role of student camera usage in enriching the synchronous online experience. Ultimately, the study underscores the benefits of students having cameras on during synchronous online classes to create a more connected and empathetic classroom environment.

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The Synchronous Online Environment: Impact on Instructor's Academic Empathy

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I. Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many students took in-person courses and entered physical classroom environments with suppressed realities. This made the complexities of their lived experiences as spouses, parents, employees, caretakers of siblings, and other family members challenging for their instructors to visualize. While witnessing these everyday realities online can be disturbing to some instructors, they may also ignite academic empathy as it can humanize the students. The term academic empathy is used interchangeably with empathy but is mostly referenced when discussing this topic in a university setting. According to Cartee (2021), "Research on caring for students through acts of empathy and compassion, especially with online learning, could add value to the knowledge base that exists today" (p. 13). Furthermore, the scope of helping students in an online class expands to understanding the breadth and depth of their individual experiences, including prior knowledge and skills, intellectual capacity, cognitive ability, and their learning preferences (Ozden, 2010). It is essential to understand that even while having a front seat to students' everyday backgrounds as well as their skill sets, they invariably still experience life challenges, unknown to faculty members, that can impact their academic pursuits. Some challenges discussed are reduced or low student engagement in online learning environments (Berges, S., Martino, S., Basko, L., & McCabe, C., 2021), not having access to a working computer and/or internet service (Johnson et al., 2020), not feeling satisfied with the instructors' online teaching experience (Elshami, 2021), and not feeling understood or empathy from the instructors (Jordan& Schwartz, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of creating a more empathetic and understanding classroom environment, particularly online, to better support students in their academic journeys.

Drugas (2020) discussed some of these challenges and, after years of in-person teaching, offered pedagogical recommendations for online teaching and learning in psychology. This research specifically highlighted key logistical positive outcomes, such as "time and money-savings; easier exams; convenience (no time lost with going from one place to another)" (p. 275). It also noted negative aspects such as "lack of social breaks, the difficulties of organization and coordination, the smaller chances for interaction during classes, the lack of proper connection or tools to access online content" (p. 275). The social breaks, for example, include 10 to 15-minute breaks built into in-person courses that are two to three hours long. The face-to-face classroom dynamics, which require students to coordinate meeting schedules for group assignments are also absent through online instruction. Drugas (2020) also shared many examples of students discussing their experiences with online courses, including enjoying the convenience of performing everyday routine activities such as cooking, cleaning, and engaging with family members during, between, and after class. While his students' perspectives of their learning experiences were informative and noteworthy, viewing the synchronous online teaching environment as a medium for instructors to understand better their students' everyday lives and challenges can also be revealing.

Instructors' ability to witness students' respective experiences and empathize may cause students to feel more understood, which will lead to better communication and more effective classroom engagement. The engagement of empathy from the

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students' perspectives has been widely researched (Ozden & Bozhurt, 2010) and from teachers engaged in face-to-face instruction (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). However, research exploring the role of synchronous online environment instruction in inspiring instructors' empathy as they observe their students' everyday activities outside the classroom setting is limited.

II. Modality of Teaching

Since the worldwide shutdown of institutions in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic started, the teaching modality in college and all other levels changed immediately and drastically. Most educational institutions had to reset their face-to-face classroom environment to online instruction, mainly from the teachers' and students' homes. For the most part, all online education was taught either through synchronous or asynchronous methods or a blend of both.

According to Lin et al. (2023), "Synchronous online learning refers to a learning activity in which students and the instructor simultaneously use audio or video conferencing" (p. 3) to conduct class time. Therefore, on an assigned day and time, students are required to log on to participate in classroom lectures and activities, like an in-person class, but instead use an online teaching platform such as Blackboard Collaborate or Zoom. In a study to investigate online options and their impact on student academic success, Nieuwoudt (2020) posits that "students can attend synchronous virtual classes from any location using any internet-connected device" (p. 2). Nieuwoudt also noted that "previous research (Offir et al., 2008; Skylar, 2009) found that interactive synchronous virtual classes are adequate to facilitate learning and that students would instead learn via highly interactive synchronous than asynchronous virtual classes" (p.6). The main difference with synchronous online learning is that it resembles face-to-face learning. In particular, this modality has a set day and time for students to log in for access anywhere they have a device and internet service.

In contrast, "asynchronous online learning refers to learning activities that do not happen in real-time" (Lin et al., 2023, p. 3). This type of online teaching does not require students to log in to any teaching platform on a particular day or time. Instead, it requires students to follow the syllabus with the recorded lectures, assignments, and discussion board responses. Students may never see the instructor during the semester. However, they can email the instructor for a quick response or secure a time during the designated office hours to discuss projects or classroom concerns.

Finally, combining both modalities was necessary, so the classroom environment now has a defined hybrid option – a blend of the physical and online environments. According to Gamage et al. (2022), "a hybrid-oriented classroom blends both the traditional and the online delivery methods effectively with learner-centric approaches, instructor intervention, and significant peer interaction and communication" (p.2). The notion of this blended option is to give students the ability to interact in-person and enable autonomy over their learning. Seemingly, there is a balance of face-to-face learning while using technology to continue engaging students even while they are not physically in the classroom environment (Almusaed, A.; Almssad, A.; Yitmen, I.; Homod, R.Z., 2023).

Face-to-face and online learning and teaching offer unique advantages and disadvantages. Bullock (2011) noted that the instructor plays a fundamental role in establishing a supportive learning environment, especially in online teaching and learning. During the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty members had to become experts in online teaching platforms and embrace having empathy toward students, who had to increase their learning curve and adjust to the many challenges of online instruction. Furthermore, Suleymanova et al. (2023) assert that addressing students' emotional needs is pivotal to effective teaching. Stibbards (2023) also highlights empathy as an effective and practical tool in student engagement. The critical point is that expertise and empathy are paramount values instructors need to set classroom pace and solicit student engagement.

III. Empathy

The word 'empathy' conjures many interpretations and definitions, including understanding and sharing the feelings of another and envisioning oneself in someone else's situation, which is widely used in healthcare, promotion of empathy in children, or understanding empathy in higher education (Chiu et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2020; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Cartee, 2021). Empathy can also be seen as a social and emotional construct that enables individuals to connect with others on a deeper level, fostering understanding and compassion (Decety & Jackson, 2004). Moreover, the word 'empathy' can be seen as an active word and not simply as a feeling. Thus, it may be used differently depending on the situation and context. In describing empathy, Fuller (2012) posits that literature has evidenced the effective role of empathy in promoting teaching and learning as well as interpersonal relationships. Further, Fuller (2012) defined empathy similar to others, pointing to the ability of the instructor to understand the needs of students. Additionally, he quoted Rogers (1969), stating that "Empathy provides teachers the ability to understand students' reactions from the inside, a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education and learning seem to students" (p. 40).

The meaning of 'empathy' is elusive and differs according to one's field of study. In its simplest

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definition, it is how individuals understand what others are experiencing and how it can affect them. Stibbards (2023) mentioned empathy as "an imaginative process" because it goes beyond attempting to understand but also incorporates the idea of experiencing what another person is feeling. Debates have ensued about how to define empathy and whether the chosen definition encapsulates its richness. To some degree, the word empathy is still confused and aligned with the word sympathy. Moreover, it can sometimes take on multiple meanings and categories (Hedman, 2012; Arghode et al., 2013; McAllister et al., 2002; Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

According to Bouton (2014), empathy is usually broken up into three (3) types: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive classification type refers to empathy as coming from a mental process. It follows that someone is empathetic when they can appreciate the perspective of others, including their thoughts and intentions (Batson et al., 1991). The second type is affective, which pulls from an emotional place and proposes that this occurs when someone can embrace another person's feelings (Davis, 1983). Bouton's third type distinguishes empathy as a physical process. It is defined as the ability to communicate verbally, nonverbally, and physically share another person's feelings, especially regarding friendships and forgiveness (Hojjat & Moyer, 2017).

The concept of empathy is primarily researched in psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience, and there are still debates as to whether empathy can be looked at as being innate, inherited at birth, or learned, meaning developed by the environment (Riess, 2017). Further, Sofronieva (2012) explained that "empathy is regarded as an innate trait, but at the same time, it should be nourished and cultivated" (p.1). Conversely, Heyes (2018) analyzed empathy as a social construct.

For this research, the source of empathy was not examined; this paper specifically focused on whether instructors could analyze and appreciate the many experiences of students' lives. Much like this paper, other researchers (Arghode et al. (2013) looked at the importance of empathy being valued as part of the natural interaction between professors and students. Zhang (2022) agreed that the "cognitive and affective categories of empathy are significant for interactive operations, [and] they are useful for occupations that need emotional support from society (p. 2).

The theoretical framework for this research applied the cognitive type of empathy by exploring whether instructors can understand their students' everyday struggles and challenges, considering the Zoom classroom setting. Bouton (2014) used the Teacher Empathy Scale (TES) to examine and conceptualize empathy from an academic standpoint, as the scale was explicitly designed to examine teachers' interaction with students.

Bouton's (2014) initial instrument included a 72-item empathy scale used to code cognitive, affective, and behavioral types; sources, either innate or learned; and clarity of each scale item. The items specifically coded 'cognitive' were used to spur the creation of open-ended questions for the college instructors in this study. None of Bouton's (2014) scales were used in this research because the goals differ in complexity. For example, the primary purpose of Bouton's (2014) study "was to initially validate the TES by eliminating items that do not statistically fit into the scale using descriptive statistics, internal reliability, CFA, and test/retest reliability" (p. 82) and was used with teachers who taught adolescents.

Bouton's (2014) quantitative study did not include college students. In contrast, this research is purely qualitative and does not characterize instructors in empathy categories. Instead, it aims to understand whether college instructors feel a sense of empathy, their definitions of academic empathy, and their underscoring thoughts as they witnessed students' daily lived experiences in synchronous online classrooms.

Developing and showing academic empathy is the key to a successful classroom environment. First, however, there are conduits to empathy featured within the teaching and learning process that need to be addressed such as: student engagement, interaction and participation, technical challenges, instructor pedagogical adaption, and student satisfaction (Zhang, 2022; Berges et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020; Stibbards, 2023; Landrum, 2021).

IV. Challenges of Online Instruction

a) *Student Engagement*

Berges et al. (2021) researched student engagement in Zoom instruction and found that there was reduced engagement compared to face-to-face instruction. Their findings included several classroom engagement strategies to aid student self-efficacy and success. Some factors hinder full engagement in synchronous online classes, such as distractions at home, lack of in-person interaction, and decreased motivation, all of which were highlighted as likely explanations for the decrease in engagement. For many decades, it was common for students to compartmentalize their daily lives. Instruction was something to be done in a classroom environment, away from family members and household interactions. Even home-schooling initially mimicked a regular classroom with a board and face-to-face instructions. Therefore, there was a deliberate separation of spaces in the household to resemble a classroom environment.

Of course, online schools have existed for some time (Benedetti (2015); In recent years, the institution of higher education has become inundated with Massive Open Online Course options, increasingly seeking to

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meet the educational needs of online learners. They have essentially been a sector of higher education since the 1600s (Beaver, 2009). However, the dynamic of online instruction has dramatically changed with the advent of the pandemic. Moreover, it has gained more exposure and a sense of normalcy during the last few years. The teaching environment is evolving, and the debate is no longer only about classroom engagement and understanding students' needs. It now extends to engagement on online platforms and the need to practice empathy towards students as instructors teach and are introduced to their students' personal respective spaces and learn about those various spaces.

Generally, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there had always been a separation of home and school. Post-pandemic, the notion of teaching and learning changed. Students now had to adjust their lives to accommodate class time from a room or space at home. In most educational settings, the switch was not smooth and thus felt more like an abrupt interruption to their daily home lives. Moreover, it diminished the intended advantage of continuing the engagement and interaction of school life (Richmond et al., 2020).

In the midst of trying to figure out how to navigate the teaching and learning process, everyone had to employ some level of empathy. Instructors had to determine the best methods to engage with students, understanding that the environment from which their students were broadcasting was the same environment within which they were daughters, sons, parents, caregivers, and employees with other roles and responsibilities too. Similarly, the students had to understand that some instructors were unfamiliar with the tools needed for an engaged and enhanced online classroom environment (Cooper, 2004). In trying to come to terms with the uncertainties of the time, understanding the many inherent circumstances that impeded the success of the classroom environment, such as students not having a working computer, so many students logging in from their phones, or instructors having to share computers with their family members highlighted the importance of empathy (Gupta et al., 2022; Richmond et al., 2020).

In trying to understand the uncertainties, empathy was a key factor in bridging the gap. Varying levels of understanding were expressed and experienced by both students and faculty, leading, in some cases, to a more engaged classroom environment.

b) Student Participation

Research by Wong et al. (2023) explored student participation levels and interaction during Zoom classes. They found that students were less comfortable actively participating in Zoom discussions compared to face-to-face settings. So, students did not interact frequently in class and with their peers. Even though students completed discussion board exercises, a vast number of students lacked peer-to-peer collaboration. While Stibbards' (2023) article focused more on teaching students the value of empathy – that skill should be primarily directed from the instructor. Of course, there are many elements to enhance students' participation in the online polls and breakout rooms, as well as incorporating tools such as Mentimeter, Padlet, ZOOM, and Quick Draw (Berges et al., 2021). These strategies can foster an encouraging environment for students and instructors, especially in the online learning environment. Beyond that, however, for any approach to work, the foundation of this process must start with an empathetic instructor. Instructors must express some level of empathy to inspire students to participate in the online environment.

c) Technical Issues

Another challenge that was highlighted for online teaching, which can impact empathy, is technical difficulties. This challenge happens frequently, even in the face-to-face classroom, where there can be a glitch with something as simple as a prepared PPT slide. However, since online teaching is solely based on the computer, it is not as easy to revert to a classroom discussion or a class assignment. According to Johnson et al. (2020), online teaching and learning hindrances such as poor internet connectivity, audio/video glitches, and difficulty in shared document collaboration were reported as challenges that can potentially compromise the teaching and learning experiences.

d) Online Adaptation

Even when there were few technical issues, research conducted by Benedetti (2015) underlined the importance of students as well as instructors' adaptation to the online teaching environment. Adaptation is more than just changing the physical environment of the class; it is also about changing one's mindset and conforming to the new online environment. Benedetti looked at the process of focusing on students' learning styles as a way to engage students. That study encourages instructors to "appeal to students' learning characteristics and preferences, which include learning styles, navigation behaviors, and social and environmental factors. Utilizing these characteristics and preferences, the online instructor and student can work together on a process of online learner adaptation" (p. 171). Thus, this model identifies the students' learning styles and how they can be applied to improve the online learning environment (Benedetti, 2015).

Moreover, it was found that many instructors who have migrated their face-to-face classroom to an online modality do not adapt their lesson plans to match the online settings and, in fact, continue the old pedagogical practices online with the same expected learning outcomes (Kayaduman, 2021). Overwhelmingly, more researchers (Wong et al., 2023;

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Berges et al., 2021; and Stibbards, 2023) have found that instructors who effectively adapted their pedagogical approaches for Zoom classes (e.g., using breakout rooms, interactive activities, and virtual whiteboards) had a more positive impact on student engagement and learning outcomes. Ultimately, the research showed that engagement is not solely on students but lies heavily with the expertise of instructors' knowledge about online teaching. Furthermore, even though instructors should have expertise in using the various aspects of pedagogical platforms, including how to engage learners—students, in turn, should explore how to access, learn, and appreciate various online platforms. While adaptation for both instructors and students is important to create a better learning environment, the understanding and empathy shown in those spaces can move the needle further to a successful teaching and learning experience.

e) Student Satisfaction

For academic success within a classroom environment, student satisfaction is key. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when all instructions were changed to the online modality, there was a shift in students' satisfaction. Many students (and some instructors) were confused by the upheaval with the quick shift in teaching modality from on-campus to online classrooms. Most of them worldwide had never taken an online class before the pandemic. Landrum (2021) found in their study on student satisfaction in online environments that "students' satisfaction with online courses expresses the students' understanding of how the content delivery, what the content entails, and how students interact with faculty and peers, fits with their purpose in taking the class" (p. 87). During the pandemic, student satisfaction was compromised, and it became important for instructors to be empathetic and trained in online teaching, learning, and engagement.

V. Empathy of Instructors on Online Teaching in College Settings

Research exploring how instructors experience empathy for students in synchronous online classrooms is limited. However, some studies focus on the responses of the students' experiences when instructors display empathy in classroom environments (Fuller, 2012; Lin et al., 2023). Most of their research looked at students' perceived experiences of the instructors' empathy, but the instructors were never asked about their own ideas about whether they actually felt empathetic. In these studies, empathy was aligned with understanding. This online teaching and learning connection set the stage for more engaged students. Further, in exploring a model of empathy for student success, Meyers et al. (2019) posit that "teacher empathy is not empathy experienced by people who happen to be teachers; it is an integral part of the role of teaching" (p. 161). Their findings suggested that instructor or teacher empathy was positively associated with learning more and understanding the students in their personal and social situations. Specifically, for online courses, students who perceived their instructors as empathetic were likelier to actively participate in online discussions.

Most instructors strive for their students to feel engaged and motivated to participate in their classes, with their peers, and the college community at large. This connection at the multiple levels of the learning environment can foster a sense of belonging and motivate students to excel. It can also connect students to their career goals (Benedetti, 2015; Arghode, 2013). Moreover, Ulloque (2019) explored empathy in medical students as something to learn in professional training. This study described empathy as "the ability to understand the experience and feelings of other people and the capability to observe and understand the world from another's perspective" (p. 81). Cartee (2021), in a contemplative essay, wrote that instructors treat online college students differently than in-person students regarding grades, late assignments, or general well-being. Holmberg (2003) agreed with this viewpoint and termed it a distant education format. Holmberg also posited that empathy within an online setting is helpful in creating a promising environment and motivating students to learn in online classrooms. This research proposes to understand instructors' notions of empathy and whether they feel any sense of compassion while teaching synchronous online classes and seeing the backgrounds of students' lives on display via Zoom.

VI. Materials and Methods

a) Participants

A total of eight (8) participants from two City University of New York (CUNY) colleges were interviewed. A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants from the two colleges: Medgar Evers College (MEC) and College of Staten Island (CSI). All participants were interviewed on the Zoom Platform for an average of 50 minutes each. The six (6) participants from MEC were from various departments, including Public Administration, English, Education, SEEK, and Freshman Year Program; while the two faculty members from CSI were from the Psychology Department. All participants had an average of 19 years of overall college teaching experience, pre-COVID-19, and an average of 3 years of synchronous online teaching. The ages of the faculty members varied from the late 40s to the late 60s.

b) Procedures

The Principal Investigator (PI) performed a qualitative research study across two CUNY campuses: Medgar Evers College and the College of Staten Island.

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A college-wide flyer was disseminated to both colleges to recruit prospective research subjects. All interested participants completed a pre-selection survey that explored their teaching backgrounds and competence with synchronous online instruction. The survey specifically asked the participants about their years of teaching experience in both face-to-face and online classes and their ability to engage students in synchronous online classes. Eighteen (18) faculty members responded to the email, and the first ten (10) who completed the pre-interview survey were chosen. An unstructured interview was conducted with eight (8) of the ten (10) faculty members on the Zoom platform. The two (2) faculty participants who were not interviewed had scheduling conflicts. The interviews aimed to gain insights into the instructors' ideas on empathy in the online teaching and learning environment.

Each interview was scheduled at a time convenient for the instructor and the researcher. All the faculty participants agreed to be on camera and audiotaped. The interviews were all transcribed; each was coded for similarities in how empathy was defined and the common experiences in synchronous online classrooms. The subject or area of each course was not discussed. The focus was on the overall engagement and experiences of the students/instructor interactions in the classroom. Faculty participants were particularly asked to define academic empathy and discuss examples of situations where they felt empathetic.

VII. Results

The results demonstrated academic empathy as an awareness and understanding of students' daily challenges as they navigate life while being online students. The results did not clearly show that observing students' everyday responsibilities and roles in a synchronous environment incurred more empathy than face-to-face interactions. However, there was a clear distinction when students had their cameras on in synchronous online classrooms. For instructors, seeing the students' everyday experiences made the intricacies surrounding their lives more visible to their instructors; subsequently, the participants shared that they were more likely to be empathetic.

Most of the faculty members interviewed defined empathy as having a deeper understanding of the lives of their students. One faculty participant indicated that he gained deeper insight after viewing students juggling being a parent, employee, and student, allowing for a more comprehensive view of his students. Another faculty participant explained that the modality of synchronous online teaching allowed them to understand students' everyday lives by witnessing their family members' activities during class time. Yet another faculty participant indicated that the modality did not matter, and they, in fact, showed empathy in the physical classroom as well. This faculty participant felt that they were able to understand their students and empathize with them regardless of whether or not they were able to witness their students' everyday lives on screen. This participant further expressed that engaging with students during office hours is the window to knowing their students better.

The faculty participants shared numerous stories, which allowed them the opportunity to witness students in their everyday environments while in synchronous classes.

Some examples are:

- A little boy walking by the computer and waving. When asked about the new class member, the student apologized and explained that they babysat their youngest sibling.
- Students were driving from work while in Zoom class. In one class, the instructor conducted a Quiz, so the student had to pull over on the Highway. When the instructor found out, he discussed his concern about the danger of doing this. In the next class, the student's husband was driving while the student participated in class.
- Students sitting at the dinner table while people with a plate of food walked behind and around them. In another instance, the student was eating food at the dinner table.
- The rare occurrence of a spouse walking in from what appeared to be work and giving a hello kiss to the student. The student quickly attempted to turn off the camera, but the gesture was seen, at least by the instructor.
- Students doing laundry and other household chores.
- Students in pajamas on their beds are seen closing their eyes while listening to the lecture.
- Students at work, in their office, and muting to discuss something with colleagues or their staff.
- A dog walking by or a cat sitting on the student's lap.
- The most common stories were of students lying in bed with the computer or tablet under the covers to create a space and drown out the distractions around them.

Of course, there were other stories; some were of students who appeared to be unengaged in classroom discussions, even though their cameras were on, and others where students were fully engaged in the class discussion even with an active background. Most of the activities in the examples above did not distract faculty participants. However, some gave cause for concern due to the dangers of completing certain tasks while attempting to participate in class activities, such as quizzing while driving. Additionally, all the faculty participants noted that they wondered whether the other

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students in the class felt distracted. The underlying thought, however, was that this ability to witness students' everyday lives brought an awareness that students are multi-faceted. The notion that students were logged in with all these layers was fascinating.

VIII. Limitations

Most current research on empathy and online teaching and learning in college is generally limited. Moreover, most of the existing research focused on understanding students' viewpoints on whether their instructors were empathic. Further research is needed for a deeper understanding of how instructor empathy specifically impacts online teaching practices and student outcomes, more so from the instructors' point of view.

A limitation of this specific research study was that the sample was small and not representative of the entire City University of New York (CUNY) faculty population, as there are 25 Colleges under the CUNY umbrella. Further, the faculty participants did not represent a sufficient cross-section of the varying departments at their respective institutions.

IX. Discussions

Witnessing students' everyday lives in synchronous classroom environments can help gain a holistic understanding of the students' lived experiences. The various definitions of instructors' academic empathy reflect the multi-layered nature of students' realities in dealing with their day-to-day online activities. The notion that students are parents, employees, and caretakers while engaging in Zoom classes can stir academic empathy in instructors. In this study, faculty participants defined empathy in various ways: 1) the understanding that students have many responsibilities, 2) recognition of students' determination despite challenges, 3) understanding students' academic experiences, 4) being open to hearing students' concerns, 4) identifying students' needs and finding solutions, and 5) acknowledging students family difficulties, all the while helping them to be accountability for their responsibilities as students.

Though this study did not focus on the differences in the faculty participants' ages, the age ranges highlighted some variation in responses. The instructor participants who were averaging 50 years old were more likely to have taught for most of their 20 years plus experience, whereas the instructors in the late 50s and late 60s had other career changes before teaching and were profound in the belief that face-to-face teaching and learning was the best teaching platform. Additionally, these participants' experiences as students in physical classroom environments colored their views on face-to-face preferences, as they believe that developing social skills and relationships is possible only in physical classrooms. None of the older faculty participants had ever taken an online class as students. However, they did admit that there were advantages for students. They asserted that this synchronous teaching method can be a way for students to save commuting time and money and engage in classroom settings while fitting in their other responsibilities.

Additionally, participants were asked the advice they would give to new faculty members who wanted to teach in the synchronous modality. The recommendations included the following:

- "*New instructors should first teach a face-to-face class before venturing into a synchronous class because there is greater value to teaching in person before moving to online*."
- "*Be fully trained not only on the application or platform used to teach but also on tools for engagement*."
- "*Flexibility and accountability are keys to teaching in all modalities, so understanding where students are and providing the resources to help them should be first and foremost*."
- "*On the first day of class, tell students that they need to be prepared and show up as a student for this online class*."

A clear consensus among the study participants was that synchronous online learning and teaching need to be engaging, and to accomplish that, students need to have their cameras on.

X. Conclusion

The idea of entering students' environments and or spaces is unique. This can also be intimidating for many underserved students as some may have shared spaces, small spaces, or no space of their own. It has even become commonplace to see students logged into class under the covers, striving to carve out a place to call their own. This study specifically explored academic empathy in instructors as they witnessed students' lives. The fact that students show up in synchronous classrooms bearing the burden of other personal responsibilities and roles can be challenging for both students and instructors. However, considering these experiences allows for a student-centered and holistic approach to teaching and learning in online environments.

In an essay about the value of empathy in academia, Pena (2021) informally surveyed students on challenges they experienced with the online instruction modality; there were positive and negative comments. However, one student commented that the instructor was not sensitive to their academic and lived experiences. Pena (2021) reflected that "the processes of learning and discovery are not individual ventures; rather, they are driven by communities within academia. To ignore the importance of empathy in these settings is

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a disservice to the academy" (p. 2). Empathy in the synchronous online classroom is the foundation for creating a more understanding environment to holistically and realistically support students through their academic journeys.

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