

Hope matters: How an online learning community advanced emotional self-awareness and caring during the COVID-19 pandemic

Renee Hobbs

University of Rhode Island, USA



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Corresponding Author:

Renee Hobbs
hobbs@uri.edu

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ABSTRACT

For many educators with interests in digital and media literacy, the COVID-19 pandemic was an inadvertent opportunity to explore digital and media literacy through online learning and professional development. This paper describes how a diverse and multidisciplinary group of educators gathered each weekday in a Zoom video conference meeting for fellowship, emotional support, and sharing, building relationships which evolved over time to support emotional growth, technology skill development, learning, and reflection. Survey data shows that program participants had higher levels of optimism and emotional self-awareness as compared with a control group. Participants who had more exposure to the program were also more likely to transfer what they learned to their work and life context.

Keywords: *digital literacy, online learning community, professional networks, optimism.*



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was both a crisis and an opportunity for educators and scholars with interests in digital and media literacy and online learning. For some, the pandemic helped inspire educators to engage with others through online learning communities, which have become increasingly routine for the professional development of teachers and in other knowledge-sharing settings. At their best, such communities of practice can be inspiring and transformational, and at their worst, they are simply unproductive or a waste of time (Ke & Hoadley, 2009).

When the pandemic led schools and businesses to close in mid-March of 2020, levels of fear and uncertainty skyrocketed, as people were afraid to go to the grocery store and supplies of disinfectant sanitizer became scarce. In finding ways to maintain a sense of community connectedness, the concept of care became a relevant and urgent priority. People needed to figure out how to take care of themselves and their family members, and to move forward in caring for students and colleagues at their workplaces and schools. The ability to maintain online social and professional relationships during a public health crisis became a requirement for people in a wide range of fields.

But how did people adapt to the online pivot as a coping strategy to limit the harms of physical isolation? How did new relationships develop in fully online spaces? How did people discover wellsprings of compassion and connectedness by entering into a supportive knowledge community?

In this paper, I tell the story of a group of educators and other individuals who spontaneously came together over the course of five months during the COVID-19 pandemic for what would turn out to be 60 one-hour Zoom meetings. I first describe the overall structure of the Virtually Viral Hangouts (VVH) meetings and offer a description of a single session to help readers visualize the program content and format. Then I present some research evidence that shows how people experienced the program as compared to a control group who did not participate in the program.

Through the creation of an intentional gathering space, a group of strangers learned to deepen their emotional self-awareness and cultivate a spirit of optimism. These meetings helped people feel safe during a tenuous moment in history; they cultivated a spirit of intentional listening; they also enabled people to model and share new digital learning practices. As people created and learned together, they felt deep bonds

of support and appreciation that enabled them to see opportunities amid the crisis.

A learning community begins

When the confusion and shock of the coronavirus isolation first began in mid-March, the members of the Media Education Lab gathered to discuss how best to support the community. In the face of the anxiety felt by so many, the power of empathy was an important response to the sudden shift to remote emergency instruction. The Media Education Lab team began getting emails from members of our education network, including elementary and secondary teachers, school and public librarians, college faculty and other educators with interests in digital and media literacy. “What’s happening at your institution?” they wanted to know. “How are you dealing with the need for remote emergency instruction?”

Within days of the shutdown of schools in our region, the Virtually Viral Hangouts (VVH) program began on March 15, 2020, and it continued Mondays through Fridays for 60 Zoom video chat sessions through to June 30, 2020. By the end of the program, more than 250 people had attended at least one session.

Online communities can be fluid and unpredictable (Rheingold, 2000) but generally move through phases that include initiation, conflict, intimacy, productive work, and termination. Learning communities emerge as language, norms, protocols, learning practices, and collaboration customs develop (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). But when the VVH program began, we had little knowledge of how online communities work and little expectation that it would last longer than a single session, or at the most, a week.

The diverse group that attended the first meeting did not know each other. None of the participants knew that this group would continue beyond the first meeting. Individuals had freely chosen to participate after seeing a post on social media about the program. They clicked on a link, not knowing what to expect. At that first meeting, there were 50 or so educators and librarians working in elementary and secondary schools, faculty in higher education, and educators in the non-profit/cultural sector. Some specialized in literacy, science or technology education; others offered support as school librarians or technology specialists. Some were education faculty teaching future teachers or communication faculty teaching future media professionals. Others worked in public libraries, museums, or non-profit organizations; some came from

countries as far flung as Brazil, Croatia, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Most were familiar with media literacy education.

The first meeting was not even designed as the launch of an online community. After consultation with team members Yonty and Elizaveta Friesem, we simply hosted a one-hour synchronous meeting for educators using a structured discussion protocol that used the principles of Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2015), where participants learn to own their interpretations of reality, avoid criticizing and blaming others, and understand how their feelings are linked to met and unmet needs. At that first session, Elizaveta shared what she had learned about the principles of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and worked through a protocol for how to practice NVC, which focuses on (1) how we express ourselves to other people; (2) how we empathize with them, and, most importantly; (3) how we communicate and connect with ourselves. This practice is rooted in recognizing that our day-to-day communication can be insidious and violent as we use language in ways that belittle, blame, or activate guilt, shame, duty, or obligation (Rosenberg, 2015).

After becoming aware of how language can divide people can create harmful feelings that promote distrust and disrespect, specific practices involving the use of language are used to support compassionate, authentic, and connected communication behaviors. A key feature of NVC is recognizing, paying attention to, and expressing feelings, wants and needs. Non-violent

communicators also avoid labelling self and others as they gain emotional sensitivity and compassion by listening to and honoring people’s feelings, wants and needs (Rosenberg, 2015).

These ideas seemed highly relevant to our COVID-19 reality, where our days were full of fears, anxieties, and unanswered questions. As the daily stresses, insecurities, and uncertainties of life with the coronavirus pandemic began to grow during the first week of the program, the daily one-hour online program included the following elements: (1) emotional check-in with opportunities to share feelings and life experiences; small group discussion, where groups of 2-5 people engage in conversation around a prompt question; (2) professional sharing, where one or more people offer examples of their current practice in emergency remote instruction; and (3) synthesis, where participants reflect on their experience and offer gratitude to those who have provided them with social or emotional support.

As the program evolved, participants who attended regularly were invited to take leadership and develop program topics themselves, working within the maintenance of a strict 60-minute schedule. The program included key features which were used predictably nearly every day. Most sessions included three or four program elements, generally in 15-20 minute increments. Table 1 shows a list of some of the most common features of the program.

Table 1. *Key elements of Virtually Viral Hangouts program*

Program Features	Description
Professional networking	Introductions were used to welcome newcomers and identify people with similar background, careers, interests, or geographic location
Emotional self-awareness	Playful check-in activity invited participants to name or label their current moods and feelings through annotation
Dialogue on coping & adaptation	Highlights and lowlights or “what’s new” activities promoted reflective thinking about changes at work and in the home
Lesson modeling in digital media literacy	Viewing and discussion, annotate an image, and other lessons adapted for online context
Resource sharing	Presentation or activity shared by a participant or special guest. Websites, platforms, or other resources shared
Small group dialogue	Formal or information discussion, sometimes with notetaking or documentation activity
Creative & collaborative media production	Storytelling Fridays, Digital Covid Cookbook, Create a Musical Tribute, Video, and Website
Expressions of Gratitude	Participants are invited to offer appreciation to others who helped them learn, reflect, or gain insight.

Each day, some professional networking occurred when introductions were used to welcome newcomers and identify people with similar backgrounds and careers. Regular participants provided updates on changes in their work or family situations. Emotional self-awareness occurred daily with an emotional check-in, using a visual protocol where participants annotate the screen to indicate their current moods and feelings. Participants were invited to explain why they choose a particular mood or feeling. Information dialogue on coping and adaptation involved trading stories about administrative decision-making in the participants' workplaces and practical coping strategies for protecting self and family members from the disease. Lesson modelling in digital media literacy were used as participants shared their curricular adaptations of face-to-face teaching or demonstrated approaches to online learning activities. Protocols for small group discussion breakouts were also modelled and demonstrated, including the practice of the moderator "popping in" to a discussion group to observe, participate, or answer questions.

For about the first six weeks, program moderators documented each program using a Google Doc to describe each program, linking to resources used, and capturing the chat discussions, which often included valuable peer-to-peer sharing. But over time, this became too time-consuming to maintain and a briefer summary of each session was made (without chat content).

As the program developed over time, participants themselves took responsibility for facilitation of the program, suggesting topics and activities that were perceived by their peers as relevant and meaningful. Some sessions included demonstrations of particular digital platforms; other sessions modeled viewing and discussion of student-produced media about the COVID-19 shelter-in-place experience.

Some used small-group storytelling practices while others involved simple notetaking activities using Google Slides. Participants also engaged in collaborative writing and media production, including the creation of a collaborative digital cookbook of favorite recipes. Other sessions made use of full-scale collaborative media production, including slide decks of digital resources, a parody song, a video, and even a website¹.

A typical VVH session

To help the reader visualize the format and structure of the program, I offer a description of one randomly selected transcript from Friday, May 22, 2020, where 24 participants participated. The transcript was read and examined for the presence of protocols, digital content or technology tools, content, and emotional response.

In this session, the program began with five minutes of introductions, where one individual introduces themselves and another participant follows, introducing themselves by making a connection between their life and the person who previously spoke. Then, an emotional check-in lasting about 10 minutes occurred. It involved a visual display of Muppet characters where participants were asked to identify which character best captured their moods and feelings at the moment. Some participants gave reasons for why they selected a particular character. Participants described feeling misunderstood; frazzled; hopeful, helpful, and curious; fabulous not fearful; hungry; and nervous.

Next, the moderator introduced the New York Times Learning Network (2019) website and explained some of the many features that support digital and media literacy education. One of the activities on this website includes a list of questions and writing prompts. The moderator displayed a Google Slide Deck with a sample of question prompts that were organized into four categories: home, childhood, friendships, and language. The discussion activity was structured by means of four Google Slides and participants were asked to select one of special interest. The slides included the following text:

Home. What is your favorite place in your house? How important is keeping a clean house? Do you need to declutter your life? Which of your belongings and furniture are most important to you? What would you grab in a fire? What would you put in your emergency go to bag? What would your dream house be like?

Childhood. What do you remember best about being 12? What rites of passage have you participated in? What are you grateful for? What advice would you give younger people about middle or high school? And what have you learned from older people?

Language. What words do you hate? How much slang do you use and what are your favorite words? How much do you curse? How good are you at coming up with comebacks? When did you last have a great conversation? How often do you have deep discussions?

¹ www.bestonlinemeetings.com

And do you wish your conversations were less small talk?

Friends. Do you have a best friend? How often do you spend one-on-one time with your closest friends? How do you feel about introducing friends from different parts of your life? Do you find it easier to make new friends online or in person? Have you helped a friend in a time of need? Do you like your friends? Is competitiveness an obstacle to making or keeping friendships?

Participants placed their names on one of the four slides. Then small group breakout groups were used for two 12-minute rounds of discussion related to these questions. After participants chose which topic they wanted to discuss, the moderator placed them in groups accordingly. The moderator checked for comprehension before small group work began, saying “If you understand the protocol for today, thumbs up.” Participants could choose to make notes on the shared Google Slides during their dialogue, but this was not required. Three of the nine small groups used this feature of the activity, while the other groups used discussion only with no notetaking.

The small group topics and format evoked a substantial number of personal stories and a wide range of emotions. This session included plenty of personal sharing related to work life, career, home life, family, life history, values, politics, and relationships. A review of the transcript using word count reveals that the most common emotional words were *harmful* (9 instances) *hate*, (8 instances) *beautiful*, *wonderful* (7 instances), *weird*, *hyper* (6 instances), *hopeful*, *hateful*, *helpful*, *happy*, *share* (5 instances), *sorry*, *trust*, (4 instances), *love*, *misunderstood*, *confused*, *engaged*, *frazzled*, *funny*, *loving*, *thanks* (3 instances), *frustrated*, *nervous* (2 instances). Evidence of the rich and varied use of emotional expression suggests the range and scope of personal storytelling that occurred during the session.

In the final 10 minutes of the session, participants were invited to synthesize key ideas. A number of comments were made about how students might respond to these questions and how useful they could be in developing trust and respect within collaborative work groups. Observations were also made about the topics themselves, as participants observed how differential levels of energy are needed to maintain friendships; how both pleasant and painful memories of childhood bleed into reflections on home; and how the politics and power dynamics of swearing affect the behavior of both students and teachers in the classroom.

When invited to offer an appreciation at the conclusion of the program, one participant said, “Kudos to this group of great friendships that are being formed in VVH even though the only way we are experiencing one another is through this online connection.” Evidence of trust, respect, and sense of community affiliation like this grew over time and was evident at many sessions throughout the program run.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Because VVH was not a planned-in-advance program, the research and evaluation strategy emerged after the program had been underway for one month. A survey questionnaire was developed with the goal of examining socio-emotional competencies associated with coping during the coronavirus. We aimed to compare program participants to non-participants by reaching out to a large sample of educators, librarians, and other professionals in the Media Education Lab network. We identified topics of interest including coping and adaptation, self-efficacy, optimism and pessimism, emotional self-awareness, professional growth, and transfer of learning. Approval was received from the university’s institutional research review board for survey research and to make audio recordings of VVH meetings with program participants.

Participants

Survey research was conducted in late April 2020 in a study designed to better understand the experience of educators who were in self-isolation during the coronavirus pandemic. We recruited subjects via the Media Education Lab mailing list, which has 11,000 members. Only 10% of the survey participants had experienced the VVH program so we had a fine opportunity to compare similarities and differences in attitudes that might be associated with program participation. A total of 448 subjects responded to the survey. We eliminated incomplete surveys, leading to a total of 433 participants. There were 54 program participants and 379 control group participants. Figure 1 shows that program participants varied in the intensity of their experience with the VVH program. One in four (24.4%) respondents had participated in only one session while 26% had participated in 20 or more sessions. Half of the participants had experienced the program for 2 – 19 sessions. Among the participants, 15% were under the age of 40; 50% were between the ages of 40 – 60; and 35% were over the age of 60.

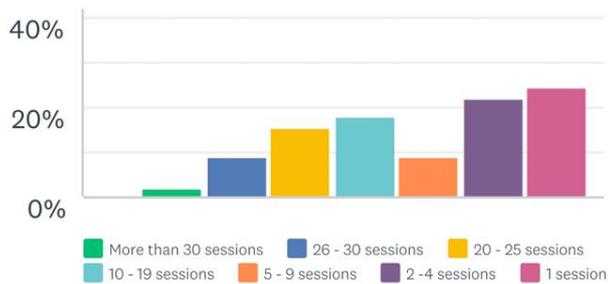


Figure 1. Intensity of participant program exposure (N = 45)

Professionally, 42% were in higher education; 28% were K-12 educators; and 30% were librarians, leaders or arts and culture organizations, or media professionals.

Measures

Coping and adaptation was measured through the use of several self-report items that examined overall coping and adaptation to coronavirus self-isolation, coping self-efficacy, optimism and pessimism, emotional self-awareness, and professionalism.

An *overall coping* measure asked, “Overall, how well are you adapting to the changes required for your life, job and career during the period of coronavirus self-isolation? Participants answered on a 10-point scale with 10 representing “excellent” and 1 representing “terrible.”

Coping self-efficacy was also measured using a cluster of five items, each rated on a Likert scale that included five choices (almost never, sometimes, about half the time, most of the time, and almost always). These items were added to create a summative score that ranges from 5 to 25, with items including: “My ability and competence to handle this situation grow with my own effort,” “I benefit from the ideas and help I receive from others,” “Challenges like this help me develop my knowledge and skills,” “What I am doing now to cope with the situation aligns with my interests, values, or goals,” and “I feel part of a network or online community.”

A *spirit of optimism* was also measured using a cluster of three items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale and added to create a summative score that ranges from 3 to 15, with items including: “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best,” “I’m always optimistic about my future,” “Overall, I expect more good things to

happen to me than bad.” *Pessimism* was also measured using a cluster of three items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale and added to create a summative score that ranges from 3 to 15, with items including: “I hardly ever expect things to go my way,” “If something can go wrong for me, it will,” and “I hardly ever expect things to go my way.”

Emotional self-awareness was measured with a cluster of three items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale and added to create a summative score that ranges from 3 to 15, with items including: “I pay attention to how I feel,” “I care about what I am feeling,” and “I acknowledge my emotions.

Valuing professional growth was measured by three items that addressed the appreciation of one’s professional identity as a knowledge worker. Each was rated on a 5-point Likert scale and added to create a summative score that ranges from 3 to 15. Items included: “I take responsibility for my professional growth,” “I enjoy participating in professional learning networks” and “I value face-to-face professional learning experiences.

Program Description. Those who had participated in VVH at least once were asked, “In your own words, how would you describe the program to others?” We used word frequency to identify most commonly used words.

Program Exposure. Because the VVH online sessions were held Monday through Friday every weekday since March 15, participants were asked to estimate approximately how many sessions they participated. These were scored on a 7-point scale, with 7 representing more than 30 sessions, 6 = 26 – 30 sessions, 5 = 20 to 25 sessions, 4 = 10 to 19 sessions, 3 = 5 to 9 sessions, 2 = 2 to 4 sessions, and 1 for participants who attended only one session.

Transfer of learning. Among participants of the VVH program, we asked questions designed to measure the extent to which practices and behaviors modelled in the program were applied to educational practice beyond the program, in an online class or a meeting. Participants were asked to indicate “yes” or “no” to the following items: used Zoom in an online class or meeting, used small group breakouts, used emotional check-in; shared ideas and resources with others while participating in the VVH program; described my experience with the VVH program to a colleague or family member; used activities demonstrated in the program in an online class or meeting; had online contact with someone I interacted with in the program; learned something new; learned

something about myself; and used a pedagogical strategy or discussion protocol modeled in the VVH program. These items were summed to create a transfer of learning overall score, which ranged from 0 to 10.

The following approach to data analysis was used. After cleaning the data, I compiled the descriptive statistics, followed by performing Pearson product-moment correlational analysis to examine the interrelationships between variables. T-tests of independent samples were performed using a conservative test statistic for data where variance is expected to be unequal between samples. I used Excel data analysis pack for all analysis procedures.

FINDINGS

Coping competencies varied considerably among participants. Evidence from the full sample suggests that COVID-19 coping competencies varied as expected across the sample. Some survey participants were thriving in the coronavirus self-isolation while others were struggling. The mean score for coronavirus coping was 7.5. On the poor end of the spectrum, there were about 14% whose coping could be described as poor: 3% rated themselves between 1–3 on the 10-point scale and another 11% who rated their overall coping and adaptation as a 4 or 5.

Many participants rated their coping as just above the middle of the 10-point scale. About 29% rated themselves at the low-middle of the scale at a 6 or 7 and 32% self-rated themselves as an 8. But one in four participants (26%) rated themselves a 9 to 10 on the 10-point scale.

Coronavirus coping is associated with self-efficacy, optimism, and emotional self-awareness. Higher levels of self-efficacy and optimism are associated with higher levels of coronavirus coping and adaptation, but these socio-emotional competencies are quite distinct from professionalism. As expected, among the survey participants, the measure of overall coping and adaptation and strongly correlated with coping self-efficacy, $r(431) = .495, p < .001$. Overall coping and adaptation was also positively correlated with optimism, $r(431) = .392, p < .001$ and negatively correlated with pessimism $r(431) = -.299, p < .001$. The overall measure of coping and adaptation was also correlated with emotional self-awareness $r(431) = .214, p < .01$ and emotional awareness and optimism are also correlated $r(431) = .21, p < .01$.

Coping, optimism and emotional self-awareness are independent of valuing professional growth. Valuing

professional growth is not associated with coronavirus coping and there is a negative correlation between coping self-efficacy and professionalism $r(431) = -.21, p < .01$. Participants might take responsibility for their own professional growth, enjoy participating in professional learning networks and value face-to-face professional learning experiences and still struggle with coronavirus coping and adaptation.

Participants who had more exposure to the VVH program were more likely to transfer what they learned to their work and life context. The program was available on a “drop-in” basis and people participated in the program to a greater or lesser extent depending upon their interest in the program, their work and family situations, the timing and schedule of the meetings, and other factors. Transfer of learning measured the extent to which practices and behaviors modelled in the program were applied to educational practice beyond the program, in an online class or a meeting.

There was a strong correlation between program exposure and the transfer of learning $r(45) = .69, p < .001$. The more times a participant attended in the VVH program, the more likely they were to engage in behaviors that involved using the practices demonstrated in their own online classes or meetings.

Table 2 shows that among participants, 90% had used Zoom to host an online class or meeting, while 49% had created small-group breakout groups in Zoom and 68% had used emotional check-ins. More than three in four participants had shared ideas and resources or described their experience in the VVH program.

Table 2. *Transfer of learning*

Used Zoom	90%
Used small-group breakout groups in Zoom	49%
Used emotional check-ins	68%
Shared ideas and resources with others	80%
Described the program to a colleague or family member	76%
Had online contact with someone I interacted with in the program	44%
Used activities demonstrated in the program	46%
Used a pedagogical strategy or discussion protocol	44%
Learned something new	78%
Learned something about myself	63%

Note. N = 45

Nearly half of VVH participants used activities that were demonstrated in the program in an online class or meeting and 44% used pedagogical strategies or

discussion protocols modeled in the program. Three out of four participants indicated they learned something new by participating in the program and 63% indicated they learned something about themselves.

The program was perceived as an emotionally supportive learning community. Participants who experienced the program were asked to describe it their own words. Word frequency data reveals the most common descriptive words were community, professional, media, learning, digital, and practice. Language with emotional valence was frequently included, with words like great, sharing, personal, supporting, open, fabulous, helpful, and informative being used 2 or more times. For example, one participant wrote, “VVH is a fabulous resource for connecting with other professionals in an informal yet informative online environment.” When asked to describe the program in their own words, participants defined it as a “great network for professionals to share ideas, network and recharge to be better prepared to lead in their own community.” Some recognized its value as “committed to learning, growing and supporting each other during this Covid-19 experience,” and others described as an “online community composed of teachers and learners who are honest, open and generous with their expertise.” Some explicitly described the program’s value in relation to its emotional support. For example, one participant explained “Simply put, it’s a lifeline.” Another wrote, “While not always possible, I try to put aside that hour once a day to remind myself that I am not alone. It has validated my feelings, introduced me to others in all kinds of situations and given me some tools to manage my work and professional life during really trying times.”

Participants were asked to describe the strengths of the VVH program. Responses emphasized the informal nature of the group, the opportunity for interaction and dialogue with others, the geographic diversity and professional identities of participants, the regular daily schedule, the willingness of participants to listen, and the lack of judgment about the particular situations experienced by individuals. One participant wrote, “I get a terrific new idea to try with my students every time. I learn better ways to structure my class environment every time. The people who attend are smart and caring and curious.” Another explained, “This group shares and

models so much that is good. It is a wonderful place to find a synthesis of ideas.” Participants also offered ideas to improve the program. Some wished for “advance notice about what is planned for each session and more choice about who to join in breakout rooms” while others wanted the time of the meeting scheduled earlier or later.

Program participants showed somewhat higher levels of coping and adaptation than the control group, and significantly higher levels of optimism. The overall self-report measure of adaptation and coping is a single item that asks participants to make an overall assessment of their coping. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare overall assessment of coping in program and control conditions. Program participants had higher levels of adaptation and coping ($M = 7.69$, $SD=1.7$) than the control group ($M = 7.43$, $SD=1.63$), but although there were differences between groups, they were not statistically significant. These results suggest that program participants have higher levels of overall coronavirus coping than non-participants, but the differences may have occurred by chance. Many factors are likely to contribute to coping and adaptation competencies required for life, job, and career during the period of coronavirus self-isolation. Table 3 presents these findings.

Emotional self-awareness and optimism are greater among program participants as compared with non-participants. Differences between program and control groups were tested using the overall self-report measure of emotional self-awareness, which ranged from 3 to 15 using an independent-samples t-test. Program participants had higher scores ($M = 12.55$, $SD = 2.38$) than control group participants, ($M = 11.83$, $SD = 2.36$), $t(54) = 2.00$, $p = 0.08$, with results that approach statistical significance.

Participants in the VVH program were far more likely to be optimistic given the uncertainty they were experiencing in their lives, and research results showed demonstrably higher levels of optimism than the control group. Differences between program and control groups were tested using the overall self-report measure of optimism, which ranged from 3 to 15.

Table 3. Comparison of VVH program participants to control group on measures of coping and adaptation

	TOTAL MEAN	SD	PROGRAM MEAN	SD	N	CONTROL MEAN	SD	N	P
Overall coping adaptation	7.46	1.63	7.69	1.7	54	7.43	1.63	379	NS
Coping self-efficacy	20	3.44	20.6	3.87	54	19.98	3.23	385	NS
Optimism	10.8	2.31	11.56	2.23	46	10.73	2.24	384	p<.02
Pessimism	6.74	2.4	6.65	2.41	47	6.76	2.39	385	NS
Emotional self-awareness	11.88	2.44	12.55	2.38	47	11.83	2.36	385	p<.08
Professionalism	6.92	1.71	6.65	1.53	47	6.97	1.69	385	NS

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare levels of optimism in program and control conditions. There was a statistically significant difference in the optimism scores when program participants ($M = 11.56$, $SD = 2.23$) and control group participants ($M = 10.73$, $SD = 2.24$) were compared, $t(54) = 2.35$, $p = 0.02$.

Measures of pessimism also found that VVH participants were somewhat less pessimistic ($M = 6.65$, $SD = 2.41$) than control group participants ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 2.39$) but the differences were not statistically significant.

No significant differences were found in coping self-efficacy. Differences between program and control groups were tested using an independent-samples t-test. There was a small and non-significant difference in the scores for program coping self-efficacy ($M = 20.60$, $SD = 3.87$) and control group ($M = 19.98$, $SD = 3.23$). These results suggest that VVH participants and non-program participants have more or less equal levels of coping self-efficacy.

Participating in an online discussion group was not associated with higher levels of overall self-efficacy in being able to handle the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic situation with effort. People valued the support and ideas received from others, and they also perceived that the crisis contained an opportunity to develop one's own knowledge and skills.

Finally, we used a measure of professionalism to better understand how attitudes about personal responsibility for learning might differ between program participants and a control group. Although program participants had slightly lower scores ($M = 6.65$, $SD = 1.53$) than control group participants, ($M = 6.97$, $SD = 1.68$) these differences did not meet the threshold for statistical significance.

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to go down in history as the largest educational technology experiment in human history (Williamson et al., 2020). Many educators around the world took advantage of the coronavirus crisis to engage in a variety of experiments with their students and colleagues. In this study, we provide evidence of the impact of an online learning community as a means for a diverse, informal group of educators to support each other, helping to muster up the emotional self-awareness, creativity and tenacity needed to handle an unpredictable situation. It's important to note that this study had all the limitations of its unanticipated beginnings, given that researchers had little opportunity to develop a systematic literature review, develop research hypotheses, or randomly assign participants to treatments. It is unlikely, however, that any data-driven approach to measurement could capture the full scope, depth and tenor of the emotional impact of the program on adult participants who were experiencing extreme social isolation.

Still, an important discovery emerged from the research reported here: optimism, emotional self-awareness, and participation in an online community may be the magic ingredients that are most responsible for the overall quality of adaptation for educators during the pandemic. For some educators, the pleasure of remote friendships was a novel discovery. For others, it might merely have been a temporary substitute.

But in a world challenged with a rapid rate of social, political, cultural, and technological change, the social and emotional competencies required for coping and adaptation are likely to be prized long after vaccine shots have been developed, tested, and implemented worldwide. Optimism may be an essential ingredient for teacher-leaders and activists who aim to bring media literacy competencies to schools and communities.

Future research should explicitly examine how optimism may be cultivated during a crisis and how it is advanced through active participation in online professional learning communities where principles of Nonviolent Communication enable educators to take responsibility for their language, thought and action.

Educators with interests in media literacy perceived that the COVID-19 epidemic was an opportunity to demonstrate the value of online communities as a form of professional development. The VVH program provided an ideal laboratory to experiment with online professional learning and introduce important pedagogical practices to those who had little prior experience with it.

This study offers important evidence that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the spirit of hope, optimism, and self-efficacy made the biggest contribution to coronavirus coping. Less important was an explicit focus on professional growth. Future research should explore the power of activating optimism about the future to cultivate feelings of trust, belonging, and empowerment among adults who participate in online learning communities. For some participants, the experience of participating in a meaningful sustained discussion with an online group over many weeks was a significant life experience. In the process of supporting their own emotional needs during a time of crisis, people also discovered how to harness some key features of synchronous online video chat groups for use in online learning.

Could online learning communities help empower educators as leaders and change agents? Could it help people to maintain an ongoing spirit of optimism? When we consider the rise of digital services available to educators, it may be important to privilege the formation of online learning communities where trust and respect can thrive. Educators may need structured opportunities to practice initiating and managing online professional learning communities. Building on this work, future research should consider the how the principles of nonviolent communication may help educators, who often put the needs of others before themselves, become more able to engage in meaningful dialogue about their own feelings, wants and needs.

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