Pandemic Pedagogy II: 
Conducting Simulations and Role Plays in Online, Video-Based, Synchronous Courses

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Foreword

The goal of this paper is to continue to support teachers as they transition their classroom-based courses to an online, synchronous, video-based format in response to recent campus closures resulting from the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which has rendered classroom gatherings unsafe.

The rapid transition of higher education online included abrupt adoption, for the most part, of synchronous, video-based learning. This is a matter of fact, and critiquing it at this point, or explaining more effective approaches to online learning would not be helpful to our colleagues striving to implement this directive and do their best on behalf of their students. Accordingly, a previous paper, Pandemic Pedagogy Part I, like many helpful guides circulated online as well as webinars conducted by universities, have sufficed with covering the basics of how to move a lesson from the geographical location in the classroom to its alternate supergeographical location online, without getting into deeper discussions of design and pedagogy. This paper follows that same route, aiming to help “brick and mortar” teachers transition specific teaching activities to an online environment. Written with teachers in the fields of negotiation, mediation, conflict management and dispute resolution in mind, this paper addresses these fields’ central teaching tool: conducting simulations and role plays. However, the paper will also be helpful for teachers

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in fields such as business, nursing, law, social work, education and others, who also utilize simulations as a teaching tool. While our focus is on negotiation and mediation simulations, our suggestions should remain valid across many simulated processes, such as patient interviewing, client counseling, coaching, student advising, etc. We will note minor tweaks required for simulating other conflict resolution processes; teachers in other fields can consider how they might tweak our guidance to support simulations in other areas.

The essay will first discuss the setup, conduct, observation, and debriefing of video-based simulations conducted in real-time in these courses. Our goal in this part is to provide guidance on conducting online conflict classrooms that resemble, as closely as possible, those that teachers and students left behind just a short while ago. While there may be methods to improve the online classroom that involve departing from classroom practices, we aim to provide teachers moving online quickly with a sense of familiarity and competency above all.

In an effort to be specifically helpful and not suffice with providing generalities, we will focus on the use of a particular platform. Zoom had been widely adopted before the pandemic’s eruption, and the closures of academic campuses resulted in a rapid increase in Zoom’s adoption by hundreds of institutes of higher education. We will specifically describe how to use Zoom as your primary interactional vehicle. Zoom is particularly suited for running simulations, given its feature of breakout rooms allowing for small-group work. However, teachers using other platforms will certainly find helpful information in this guide. They can adapt it to use in their own platform, or, if their own platform is less conducive to conducting simulations, they can consider utilizing Zoom for this purpose.

The second part of the essay will briefly describe why relying wholly on synchronous communication may not be the best idea, educationally or practically. As teachers become increasingly proficient in the online environment, they would do well to consider incorporating other approaches to online learning, and specifically to conducting asynchronous simulations. Ideas for doing so will be provided in the third part.
Part I  Conducting ‘Classroom’ Simulations Online

In this section, we will provide guidance for conducting small-group simulations during class hours, in classes being taught via Zoom. This focus aims to meet the challenge most negotiation and conflict teachers are currently facing.

Conduct of any simulation – online, or offline – requires careful consideration and implementation of four elements: Setup, Conduct, Observation, and Debrief.

Setup

1) As in your in-person courses, create a chart assigning each student to a simulation role and a simulation group prior to the class period. You should share this chart with students via email and/or post it in the course area allotted to your class on your institution’s Learning Management System (LMS) (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle)

2) Provide students with their role play material ahead of class (some teachers like to hand out simulation roles in class, and it is technically possible to do so online; however, this method is particularly clumsy online for a number of reasons, and we advise against it). You can send the information out in individual emails, or group emails to all students playing a particular role. You can also set up Group areas in your LMS, such as a Group Area for all students playing Party A, and a separate Group Area for all students playing Party B. In each group area, share the role information in the form of an announcement or a post, and this will ensure only students playing that role will have access to it.

3) Remind students to arrive to class having read the information and prepared to participate in the negotiation or mediation session.

4) If there is any preliminary work to be done (e.g., a meeting between co-mediators or a team of negotiators to plan their approach), have them do so before class. If any material (preparation forms, preliminary briefs, etc.) needs to be submitted to you, explain how students are to do so (e.g., via email or uploading to the LMS).

5) Advise students to print out their role information or preparatory notes ahead of class, or to have them available on a different device than the one they will be using to join the class, to avoid them switching between the videoconference view and other programs as they engage in the simulation.
6) Instruct students as to whether you wish them to pretend they are in a room together, or whether to incorporate the videoconferencing reality of their interaction into the simulation. We suggest you embrace the opportunity to teach and learn about negotiation and mediation at a distance. If you instruct them to treat this as an online mediation / negotiation, remind them to take this into account in the way they frame their opening statements and prepare any preliminary plans or documents.

7) ‘Arrive’ in your videoconferencing room 10-15 minutes before class time. Assign students to breakout groups in Zoom, according to their pre-assigned simulation groups. [See this Zoom tutorial] Once you have assigned students, click ‘Options’ and set them to suit your simulation purposes. For example, you can select the length of time that will elapse from when you close the breakout room to when students are back in the main classroom.

[It is also possible to do group setup longer in advance, if you enable ‘Allow host to assign participants to breakout rooms when scheduling’ in your Settings, and schedule the session ahead of time rather than just opening your room when the time comes. However, some find this trickier to do.]

Of course, advance role assignment might always be challenged by students’ absence from the lesson. You can ask students to verify that their group members are all present and to let you know via chat if one of their groupmates is not present. If any students are absent, take a 5 minute break before beginning the simulation, telling the students with missing groupmates that you will reassign them to other roles in other groups (The simplest and fastest solution is generally to assign them to be observers in another simulation group).

8) If, at any point after you’ve assigned students to breakout groups and before the simulation has begun, some technical disturbance makes it necessary to close the videoconference (or the platform, or your computer), reopen it, and reconvene in the videoconference, the assignments to breakout rooms may not be preserved. If this happens, don’t panic. Take a deep breath, be transparent with your students about the need to make adjustments and invite them to take a 5-minute recess-in-place, as you set this up once again before the simulation.
Conduct

1) Just before beginning the simulation, inform students that:
   - you are about to send them to breakout rooms to conduct their simulation;
   - they will soon receive a prompt that they must agree to, in order to arrive in the room; they should set their view to “gallery” and begin the simulation as soon as they are in the room; nobody will come by to tell them to begin;
   - if there are observers assigned in the simulation, they should turn off their video, and mute their microphone, upon entry into the breakout room;
   - you might occasionally pop into their breakout room for a few minutes to observe them at work, just as you do in classroom simulations. Let them know whether you want them to pause as you enter to fill you in on anything, or to ignore your entry and continue, with you assuming fly-on-the-wall status;
   - the length of time they have to complete the exercise;
   - if they finish the simulation early, they are to spend their time ____ (e.g., conducting self-debrief, writing up an agreement, taking a break).
   - if they need assistance they can click “ask for help” at any time, and you will do your best to check into that room to assist them (you will be notified via a prompt)

   [See this Zoom tutorial]

   - if they are booted from Zoom, or their screens freeze, or anything similar happens, they should use the original course link to log into the session again, and they should send you a message using the chat function. If they are unable to rejoin the class, they should send you an email; and,
   - if a student drops out of a breakout room and does not return within 5 minutes, one of the other group members must reach out via Zoom chat to let you know of the problem

Feel free to tweak this list to tailor it to your course and provide it to students ahead of time (e.g., post it in the LMS, or include it with the simulation role instructions you send out).

2) Make sure your email is open, and keep it open throughout the simulation.

3) Click ‘Open all rooms,’ when you wish to begin the simulations.
4) If you need to announce anything to all participants while they are in their breakout rooms (e.g., “We began 15 minutes late, so the deadline is extended by 15 minutes” or “There’s a mistake in the text; Joe and Molly are disputing the custody of their 3, not 30, children”) click “Broadcast Message to all.” [See this Zoom tutorial]

5) At the end of the simulation, click ‘Close all Rooms.’ This will begin a timer, after which all the rooms will be shut down and students will return to the main room. Zoom’s default option is 60 seconds; if you like, you can change it to 10, 15, 30, or 120 seconds by clicking on “options” when setting up the breakout rooms. If you like, you could broadcast a message 10 minutes ahead of the end time along the lines of ‘In 10 minutes, I will bring you all back to the classroom. Please use this time to debrief the simulation amongst yourselves, ahead of the general debrief in the classroom.’ If there was an observer viewing the simulation, you might task them to lead this discussion.

6) When conducting mediation simulations, there are some models which include the option for the mediator to conduct private session/s with each party (“caucusing”), without the other party present. While Zoom provides breakout rooms from the main room (which you will be using for your synchronous simulations), it does not provide the options to create breakout rooms from breakout rooms. For those who may find this confusing, which we suspect might be everybody, we will translate: If your original Zoom classroom is the main room, and you are conducting simulations in breakout rooms, mediators cannot caucus with parties by creating private rooms excluding the other party. Here are some options for conducting mediation simulations given that limitation:

- Have students conduct mediation without caucusing and compare it to previous processes in which caucusing was utilized.
- If your students have Zoom accounts, you could decide to conduct the simulation differently. When you reach the point in class at which you wish to conduct the simulation, instruct students that they are to leave the classroom, and that each group is to convene in a Zoom room opened by the group’s mediator. Remind them that they need to shut down their rooms and return to the main classroom by using the original meeting link, at a certain time. Students will leave the “main” classroom, open their own Zoom rooms, and begin the simulation; if they wish to employ caucusing, the mediator can open a breakout room for each party, and join
them in there, one at a time. When they are done caucusing, they return everyone to the main room. When the simulation is done, they close the group’s Zoom session, and log back into the main classroom for debrief. This is method has many risks and pitfalls, however, and should only be considered with students who are both very reliable and very adept with Zoom. You will not be able to observe their simulations, or communicate with them all at once; they might get ‘lost,’ unable for some reason to return to the original room, etc.

- Use the honor system: Mediators ask one party to ‘leave the room’ by muting their microphone and audio, shutting down their camera and video, and closing their laptop or putting their device down. Mediators must set in place a plan for how parties are to return to the room to rejoin the process (e.g., the mediator will text them, they are to check in after X minutes, etc.)

- Caucus using a different medium: For example, the mediator can shut off their own video and audio, and call Party A by phone for a private talk while Party B continues to wait in the online conference room.

Of course, when simulating negotiations taking place between teams of negotiators, negotiation teams may wish to caucus amongst themselves to decide how to proceed via-a-vis their counterpart team; most of what is written above applies to these caucuses as well.

7) Other process needs

Any dispute resolution process being simulated online is likely to have its own discrete elements needing consideration, as caucusing in mediation does. For example, if physical evidence is to be introduced in an arbitration simulation, the teacher should convert it to e-form. Consider the way the simulations you are planning generally play out in a classroom and be mindful of anything likely to be affected by physical distance or technological limitations.
Observation:

Zoom allows for close approximation of classroom-based study: In a classroom, you would move between tables or classrooms in order to observe different negotiating pairs or mediation groups; in Zoom you transition between breakout rooms. You have access to all the breakout rooms you created for students, and can move from one to the next, with the click of a button, spending a few minutes in each.

Click ‘Join’ on the list of breakout rooms to enter any of them. Click ‘Join’ on a different room, to move from room to room, or click ‘Leave’ to return to the main classroom. [See this Zoom tutorial]

If you are using a platform that does not permit creation of breakout rooms, you can compensate for your own lack of presence by appointing students to be observers in each breakout room, telling them ahead of time what to look for and giving them a role in the debrief. Another approach to resolving the observation issue is to forego small-group simulations, and instead conduct full class fishbowl simulations, in the main classroom.

Debrief

As you do in your classroom, you can conduct your debrief through a mixture of preparing teaching points in advance, develop teaching points throughout the activity, conducting a conversation in real time, and nailing down key points in your summary. Doing all this online requires some extra attention to information gathering and conversation management. The online classroom offers new ways for gathering information from students and requires more directive facilitation of the conversation. Things that would unfold dynamically in a classroom might be stilted in a videoconference discussion. Multiple people speaking at once can be helpful in the flesh, but not on videoconferencing. In the classroom, you notice people who want to speak, and you might signal them nonverbally (e.g., that they are next, that they are after Mary, that they must wait, that they can go ahead, that they should jump in to challenge the current speaker). These do not happen online. In this section, we will provide guidance for navigating this stage of class.
1) Take a quick count to verify that you have everyone back in place. We suggest planning in an extra 2-3 minutes for anyone with tech mishaps… or for anyone who ran to the restroom.

2) Collecting results of the simulation can be done in the following ways:
   - Have students copy>paste their agreement into a Google form or Google doc, to which you have shared a link ahead of time. Then, either ask all students to switch to the google doc and review all outcomes before you begin to get into substance or open the webpage with the Google Doc on it while you are in screen share mode.
   - Ask the mediator, or the observer, in each group to summarize the endpoint of the mediation in 2-3 sentences and send it to you by email at the end of the mediation. Copy>paste these into a document on your computer, and put it up by sharing your screen, at the beginning of the debrief session. You might give students a 5-minute break-in-place to accommodate this.
   - Ask the mediator/observer in each group to share the results, in brief, by unmuting their microphone and giving an oral summary to the class. If you’ve numbered the groups, you can ask them to proceed according to group order, and then the mediators/observers might weigh in smoothly, one after the other, without you needing to intervene and facilitate. If not, call on students explicitly.
   - As mediators/observers report, one way or another, you can type the results on a slide or document that you are simultaneously screensharing, or you can switch to whiteboard mode and make notes as you might do in a classroom.

3) While conducting a medium-size group (15-30 students) conversation online, here are some guidelines to follow:
   - Set your view to Gallery.
   - Click Alt-A so you always have the Zoom controls visible.
   - Click the Participants and Chat buttons, setting your display to show the participant list and the chat simultaneously if possible (this varies between Zoom versions and settings). If not, keep the chat visible.
   - Have all students verify they are on mute.

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• Instruct students regarding the interactional ground rules: Will they speak according to a certain order? Are they to raise their virtual hands? Jump into the conversation unsolicited? Pose questions in chat? Wait to be called on?

• Do not go around ‘in a circle,’ according to the order of students in Gallery view. Each participant sees these video windows arranged in a different order.

• If you wish to follow a system for discussion (e.g., in each group, the mediator speaks first, and then Party A, Party B, and the observer), the debrief will be more orderly, with less occurrences of people talking over each other, silent gaps waiting for someone to speak, etc. On the other hand, it will be less interactive than your regular classroom.

• If you wish to have a more dynamic conversation, you must be more directive and explicit in calling on people.

• Remind students of the ‘raise hand’ function. When they click this button, you will see a brief prompt on the screen, and a raised hand next to their name. you can then call on that student. The problem is, that while speaking and focusing on delivery, teachers often miss this. Don’t.

• If you are comfortable with students jumping in to ask questions, make comments, or challenge each other during lulls, let them know.

• Encourage students to ask questions in the chat. Take occasional pauses to review the chat, as you may miss comments in real-time.

• If you have a teaching assistant, they can be extremely helpful in keeping an eye out for raised hands and chat comments. Coordinate with them regarding how you want them to notify you or weigh in.

Finally, if you find running a classroom-style debrief in Zoom to be ineffective or onerous, consider using alternative debrief methods including having: students conduct the debrief themselves in breakout rooms with instruction sheets; student-observer led debriefs in breakout rooms with instruction sheets; individually written reflection papers; asynchronous forum discussions in your LMS, etc.
Part II  Potential Challenges to the Transitioned Classroom

Thus far, we have made suggestions for successfully replicating classroom-simulations online. This is in line with the immediate need for higher education to respond to the pandemic by relying on synchronous videoconferencing as a temporary measure replicating yesterday’s classroom.

We believe that online education has so much more to offer than this facsimile classroom. However, what we are about to suggest does not stem from our desire for teachers to experiment with more sophisticated approaches to online teaching for their students’ benefit. Rather, it stems from a pragmatic set of concerns, which we will detail here only briefly.

To the extent that these were even considered, overarching assumptions underlying the shift to replicating online classrooms in video and in synchronous real-time include:

- Students’ continued availability during the original class time
- Students’ continued capacity to focus during the original class time
- Students’ access to devices during the original class time
- Students’ access to good quality internet during the original class time

And, while we’re at it:

- Teachers’ continued availability during the original class time
- Teachers’ continued capacity to focus during the original class time
- Teachers’ access to devices during the original class time
- Teachers’ access to good quality internet during the original class time

Here is a list of potential disruptions to any or all of those, which (while we hope never occur) are entirely reasonable, likely, and foreseeable developments with the continued spread of the COVID-19 pandemic:

1) Teachers and students who work on desktops on campus might not equipped with suitable or quality equipment to work from home. Their backup equipment may be less than optimal for the current mode of class delivery.

2) Teachers’ equipment might break down, and their IT department cannot help them; students’ laptops might malfunction, and computer repair shops in their area are closed.

3) Students and teachers find themselves in hectic home environments, with their children or siblings at home like themselves. They may have no designated home office, or no
door to shut for privacy. They may be unable to sit down with a screen in a quiet spot during specific hours. Even if they do, they might be unable to concentrate, concerned that someone will walk in, or concerned with their loss of privacy due to the entire class viewing their home situation.

4) Students and teachers find themselves tasked with caring for children and siblings around the clock… while these children and siblings have become homeschoolers, themselves transitioned to video-based synchronous classes. Students in this position might be unable to concentrate, and must spend their time assisting other learners; additionally, there may simply not be enough devices in the home to go around.

5) Students and teachers may discover that their home internet connection, while generally sufficient, is insufficient when everybody in the house concurrently engages in videoconferencing.

6) Students and teachers might find themselves caring for people who have been contracted COVID-19. There lives may be wholly disrupted, to say nothing of their anxiety levels and its effect on their capacity to learn on-demand. They may now reside in care facilities, or in a relative’s home, with poor internet and no uninterrupted time.

7) Students and teachers themselves contract COVID-19. There is no need to expound on the various aspects of the disruption this might cause.

8) Students, adversely impacted by the pandemic’s effects, might need to take temporary jobs and are no longer available on the original class schedule. If you are reading this and think that this could not happen to teachers as well, you are probably full-time faculty. If you are an adjunct teacher, as many in the conflict and negotiation world are, you might face similar need to change your employment pattern.

9) Students and teachers might suffer from anxiety, depression, or other debilitating conditions resulting from stress, trauma, and the events of our times, and be unable to perform-on-demand.

Some of these situations are already the day-to-day reality of some teachers and students. Others, particularly the more dire developments, could become more widespread reality in a week or a month. We could continue to compile a far longer (and darker) list, but this should suffice to make the point: While the future is hard to predict, video-based synchronous teaching during the originally designated course hours might not continue to be an appropriate or effective mode for
class delivery. Educational institutions might be slow-turning ships when this reality becomes apparent; individual teachers can and should be nimbler.

We will not attempt, in this paper, to address the wide question of teaching alternatives to this mode. Rather, we will retain our focus on simulation, and suggest ten simulation and simulation-like activities that might be helpful, should you decide to veer your teaching away from the current model. These activities do not need to be conducted in ‘real time’ (conducted during class hours) and furthermore, are largely asynchronous (do not require all students to be online and available at the same time).

We suggest that teachers who have gained competence with conducting videoconferencing-based simulations in their real-time classes, as described in the previous section, begin to experiment with these other methods. Should a shift in teaching modes become necessary, you will be prepared.

The good news is, that while many of these activities can be conducted asynchronously to different extents, they can also be conducted in your current, synchronous, real-time classroom. In other words, if you are concerned about meeting ‘class time’ requirements, or cautious about overloading students with out-of-class assignments, you can teach your classes just as you do now, and incorporate these activities at the point in time at which you would previously have begun your synchronous, real-time, video-based simulation in breakout rooms. Students can remain ‘present’ in the videoconferencing classroom, and meanwhile engage in the exercises listed below.

Part III 10 Asynchronous Simulation Exercises

Asynchronous, in the sense we are using it here, means that these exercises do not need to be conducted in ‘real-time’ during class hours. Students can complete them at their time of choice.

Note, that some of these exercises do require students to be in contact with each other, which can be via synchronous communication (e.g., videoconferencing) or asynchronous communication (e.g., email) communication. However, in both circumstances, the exercises are completed on students’ own schedule, without conforming to class hours, and if any coordination needs to be done, it is with a very small number of others. For example: If students conduct a negotiation simulation via telephone, they are using synchronous communication that they must schedule.
with their simulation counterpart, but it will be easier for two people to find a time that works for both of them than it is to identify a time that works for 30 people. A mediation group might choose to convene at midnight via videoconferencing, requiring coordination between three or four students rather than an entire class. As noted above, you might also conduct these exercises in a synchronous, real-time fashion in your current transitioned course: for example, students remain in the videoconference room with muted microphones, and call each other to conduct a negotiation by phone.

1) Students negotiate or mediate via videoconferencing: As opposed to the in-class simulation we’ve described above, we now intend assigning students to set a time with each other to meet online and conduct the simulation. If you wish students to learn about the effects of this medium on negotiation and conflict interactions, assign them to read this chapter.

2) Students negotiate or mediate via email: If you wish them to learn about the effects of this medium on negotiation and conflict interactions, assign them to read this chapter. This chapter includes some ideas for incorporating email negotiations into your teaching, and this simulation is designed to be conducted via email.

3) Students negotiate or mediate in a threaded forum discussion: You can equip each group of students with their own private area in the course site on the LMS, with a dedicated discussion forum only they can partake in.

4) Students negotiate or mediate via telephone: This is a simple method, simulating a common real-world activity.

5) Students negotiate or mediate via text messaging. If you wish them to learn about the effects of this medium on negotiation and conflict interactions, assign them to read this chapter.

6) Students negotiate or mediate with externals: Students identify a volunteer who is external to class (e.g., a sibling) who is willing to serve as their negotiation counterpart in a role-play, or mediate between two people (e.g., a pair of friends) who are not students in the course. They negotiate through any of these media, or face-to-face.

7) Students negotiate or mediate via a platform of their own choice: Allow each pair or group of students to choose the communication channel they will use to conduct the mediation, so long as they have the exercise completed by the deadline.
8) Students engage in Adventure Learning: Assign students to engage in actual negotiation processes, whether in their own physical surroundings or online. For discussion of the different ways to conduct adventure learning (albeit in non-pandemic conditions), which might give you ideas for designing online adventure learning activities, see this chapter, and while we’re at it, this one too. This chapter describe how to use adventure learning in the campus environment and ordinary student surroundings. For assessment considerations, see this chapter.

9) Student v. Computer: Have your students negotiate, rather than with each other, with computer programs that provide them with a scenario, a role, a counterpart, choices to make, and counterpart response to their choices. One such program, freely available, focuses on students’ application of the negotiation model introduced in Fisher, Ury and Patton’s 3rd ed. of Getting to Yes, and provides feedback on students’ choices. Assign students to play A Trisolan Map, and to provide their feedback on it.

10) Students design simulations: Rather than assigning students role information and instructing them to meet up and conduct a simulation, assign them to design and write a negotiation or conflict simulation on their own. Students create a storyline including the issues parties are in conflict about, their interests, goals, alternatives, and other negotiation and conflict elements. They then form these into negotiation or mediation simulation material. Research has shown that learning benefits of designing simulations actually outstrips those of role-playing in them; moreover, students enjoy design tasks even more than they do role-playing. For a guide to assigning students this task and sample instructions see this chapter (sample instructions to students are in the appendix).

As with any simulation, plan for each exercise taking into account the four stages of setup, conduct, observation, and debrief discussed in Part I above. As we are now discussing incorporation of these exercises into your current class rather than describing their full use in asynchronous online learning, we will only briefly note that you can utilize your synchronous classes to give instructions in the setup phase, and to debrief the exercises. Most of the discussion in Part I, other than the specific use of Zoom for real-time simulation conduct, can be applied to the first seven exercises we’ve listed, which involve ‘direct’ interaction, with common sense adaptation. The ‘Observing’ stage will require some creativity, and we encourage teachers to consider proxies for direct observation, such as reflection papers. The eighth, ninth, and tenth
learning activities require more adaptation of our discussion in Part I, which is why we’ve provided links to more detailed literature on these exercises, explaining in greater detail how to implement them.

Conclusion

Who has time for conclusions? Instead, we’ll use this last section to set you up on the starting line: You can conduct simulations in real time in your transitioned classroom. Once you’ve gotten the hang of that, start trying other simulation methods. Your students will benefit from them now, and they may become your pedagogical lifeboat later on. Get to work, and good luck. As problem-solvers, we are used to seeing opportunities in the face of adversity.