

# Pandemic Teaching

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**Abstract:** The 2020-2021 academic year was one like no other in the history of the US higher education system. After a rapid, unplanned shift from mostly in-person teaching, teaching remotely with technology became the norm. This is the story of how I, an associate professor, learned how to teach remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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I was supposed to be on sabbatical the 2019-2020 academic year. While the fall was spent focused on my research, the spring found me serving the university in an administrative role. While I learned quite a bit about academic leadership and the complexities of responding to a pandemic, what I didn't experience in the spring of 2020 was the required, instantaneous shift to remote learning. As I transitioned out of the administrative role in June, I was faced with the realization that, just like everyone else, I was going to be teaching from home for at least the next semester or two. I panicked—I had no idea how I was going to manage remote teaching.

I am an associate professor of social work at a mid-sized regional state university with a large percentage of first generation and Pell grant students. We believe that we are a *teaching* university, prioritizing teaching over research even for our most senior faculty members. Prior to the pandemic, I had been an okay teacher, receiving average to above average class evaluations. I had taught a few hybrid courses, but I had never taught a completely online course. Even though I had taken a course on how to teach a hybrid course, I never actually felt that the hybrid courses I taught went particularly well.

Students, I was sure, do not want to take online courses. Based on the past, albeit anecdotal, feedback from students, our faculty were sure that online courses were not appropriate for, nor wanted by, our social work students. Additionally, I was convinced that social work should not be taught online. Social work, we know, is about relationships. How was I going to create those requisite relationships and experiences through a computer screen? I admit I panicked a little thinking about how I was going to manage the shift to remote teaching. What was I going to do?

Like any good scholar, I began by scouring the literature and the internet about how to teach online. I spent the summer of 2020 reading everything I could about how to build community online. I read countless articles, listened to every podcast I could find on the subject, and signed up for as many teaching tips newsletters as I could. In short, I did my homework. I didn't do it alone. My university hired instructional designers and began faculty learning communities to help us think about and implement this new way of teaching. I collected everything I could find that would help me put together a plan. And plan, I did.

At first, I focused on the technology. I explored the options on the e-learning platform available to me, learned about the many options within Zoom, integrated the many software programs I had so that they kept each other up-to-date, and even talked with my daughter and a friend, both of whom are in graduate programs, about what technological strategies worked for them. While they did share some technology-focused thoughts, I had forgotten that I knew most of what these grad students told me. I knew about building professional relationships that promoted curiosity and engagement.

As Darby and Lang (2019) note, good teaching is good teaching. What was needed online is very similar to what is needed in the classroom; you just have to figure out new ways to make it happen. I believe that all education is relationship based, so I did need to figure out how to build those relationships through a screen. More importantly, though, I needed to think through what the consequences of the pandemic were for my students. This wasn't just about being remote; it was about the "why" of being remote.

Once I got past the idea that I needed to become a tech-wiz to teach online, I revisited the material that I had read to see what the authors said beyond the available technological answers. What I began to realize was that because of the pandemic, being my most empathetic, understanding self might be the most important dimension of teaching needed, even while we were doing the teaching and learning through a screen.

I began by focusing on the desired takeaways of the course and making sure that everything planned in the course—readings, homework, and assignment rubrics—focused specifically on those goals. Given what I had read about the complexity and difficulty of learning at home during the pandemic, it seemed important to not include unnecessary work. The second important characteristic that seemed important to include was built-in flexibility. I decided to no longer have required due dates for most of the assignments. Instead, I had suggested due dates with the understanding that I would accept assignments up until the very last class. I knew that this could be problematic, especially if it left me with an unreasonable amount of work at the end of the semester, but I decided to take the risk in order to balance the students' burdens.

The last piece of course structure that I attended to was the actual course assignments. Previously, I had followed the traditional assignment structures that I had experienced as a student and that I had seen other faculty members use—traditional, formal, academic papers. I thought about the importance of this assignment format for the courses I was teaching. Were these types of assignments the best way for students to demonstrate to me that they understood and were able to integrate and synthesize the ideas? For all but one assignment, I removed the required academic paper and provided assignment options that I felt confident I would be able to evaluate.

I then turned my attention to how to build the requisite relationships needed for learning to happen. I realized that there are really two different types of relationships that are important in a classroom: those between the students and the instructor and those between the students. How

would I prompt and then support those relationships? I started by thinking about what I had control over and what was required for the course.

Returning to the course assignments, I included more group work that could be done asynchronously but required students to work together. For instance, in one course I required a group project that consisted of three to four students discussing a closing question posed by the authors of the textbook and providing to me their answer or answers. The group did have to share with me evidence of their discussion: either a recording if they were doing the discussion synchronously, or a copy of the texts or emails used if they were doing the discussion asynchronously. I also revisited the course plan and made sure that I was including plenty of opportunity for small group chats, breakout rooms, and discussions via the e-learning discussion board.

Reviewing all that I had done, I realized that I had missed probably the most important aspect of the teaching/learning relationship—that between an instructor and the individual student. What was I to do? I knew that this couldn't be “required” in a course or created via course structure. I had to admit that, to do this well, I was going to have to show up in all the ways that were going to matter to each student. I began a list of the behaviors that I thought would help; I then committed myself to doing these throughout the semester.

In order to get to know each student, I decided to begin each session with a check-in. Our check-ins began with one's name and pronouns (if comfortable sharing) followed by my check-in question. To make it fun, I came up with a list of questions, asking things like what your personal weather forecast is today, and why (if you feel like sharing). I also decided to offer optional drop-in sessions for students who had additional questions that we couldn't get to during the shorter online class session time, or who had questions about the homework or reading that they wanted to explore outside of class. Additionally, for those courses that were designed to be asynchronous, I recorded a video each week to cover the important aspects of the reading material.

I also committed to reaching out to any student for whom I have concerns. In the past, I was not this proactive, believing that students have the responsibility and the right to make decisions about how they move through a course and a semester. For instance, I did not accept many late assignments due to my presumption that the assignment had not been completed due to poor choices. Under the present circumstances, I realized, it may not be a choice at all, but a consequence of the pandemic. Another possible consequence of the pandemic learning experience, I thought, could be the need for more prompt, holistic feedback. While in the past I would provide some feedback, I also required students to meet with me if they didn't understand my notes within their assignments. I decided that might not work right now, so my feedback has become more robust including that which is good, that which could have been improved, and that which missed the mark.

Lastly, I vowed to be present. In the “before times,” showing up included dressing professionally, being prepared with the class session lecture, and staying on top of grading assignments. This year, it was going to look differently and, I suspected, I would need to show up differently. I decided to show up as my most authentic self. Being transparent about my concerns for the semester and my fear about teaching in a new format. Being explicit about the need to have student engagement for the course to work and of my struggle to read the room remotely. Most importantly, I was going to show up empathetically, understanding that these circumstances are not what we had planned for or expected. I would show up expecting students to be doing the best they can under extraordinary circumstances and be sure to explicitly recognize and support that.

Even as I wrote my opening remarks, which included my concerns and fears for the semester, I was discouraged. I was afraid that the semester would result in less student engagement, feeling disconnected and more isolated than when we began the semester. Usually the optimist, my fear had gotten the better of me. As the semester began, I promised myself that I would simply do the best I could and see what happened.

What happened surprised me. All the planning and learning that I had done over the summer seemed to pay off. The weekly check-in question process took quite a bit of time, yet it became an important ritual for each class, providing opportunities for students to learn about their classmates and to share a bit about themselves. I also heard that students would follow up on these conversations outside of class which resulted in relationships being formed, albeit from a distance.

Students were engaged in class and out of class. Even via Zoom, there was a qualitative change in the engagement I experienced. I don't know if it was a result of students not being able to hide in a Zoom call, if it was because we were all the same size on screen, or if it was because I no longer felt like I was onstage, expected to be the expert. Something was different. Students talked to each other as much as they talked with me. Individual work and class preparation became more obvious, and there was an increased sense of rigor in the conversations. This may have been the result of clarity of purpose, with the course more clearly focused on just a few important concepts/ideas. Or it could have been the resulting democratization of everyone being the same size on the screen.

Discussion boards became more than just posting one's thoughts and then simply agreeing with what another student posted. There were actual back-and-forth discussions among students. The drop-in sessions were slow to get started, but as the semester progressed, more students made an effort to attend. We often veered away from course topics in our discussion, ending up with rich, rewarding discussions that used to happen before and after each in-person class. As the semester came to an end, I was pleasantly surprised by the notes of thanks and the number of students who registered to be in class with me again for the spring semester.

Looking back on the semester-and-a-half that I have taught online, I am struck by the importance of connection and engagement in the teaching/learning process regardless of modality. I am also more aware than ever of the various ways that one can create space for or manifest those characteristics, always taking into account the context within which one is teaching. Minimizing ancillary to-dos while amplifying and prioritizing content has been an important reminder for me. And, while the pandemic will result in major changes for higher education, it has also reminded us of the importance of interdependence.

As we recognize the possibility of future pandemics, it will be important to know the differences in technological availability and access to technology throughout the country. No longer a privilege, high-speed internet access is a necessity, especially as we attempt to provide higher education resources that do not have disproportionate outcomes. Additionally, it is important to know empirically what strategies worked for the many different types of higher education classes that exist and the resources needed to make those strategies work.

As of this writing, we are now halfway through our second full semester providing courses remotely, and we have been told that we may be able to return to our classrooms for the fall 2021 semester. I am excited about the prospect of being back on campus with my colleagues and hope to meet in person the students with whom I have been in classes. Reflecting on this experience has me wondering about the modality within which I do my best teaching. This is certainly not what I expected.

### **References**

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