11

Some Lessons and Tales: Moving Classes Online in the Advent of a Crisis for Which No One Signed Up

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Thursday, March 12, 2020. Afternoon. Final week of class before spring break at Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, where I teach composition classes as I do at Harper College in Palatine. At this time of day, it had been fairly typical to engage in conversations with peers in the faculty office. Many adjunct professors circulated COVID-19 tales about their other colleges' latest reactions to the pandemic and the possibility of college closures across Illinois. Some of the rumors were finally given real legs. At Oakton, the bold heading on the staff email sent by the college president read: "COVID-19 Preparedness and Prevention Update." The missive raised more questions than answers. This was the first email that marked the beginning of a series of others that would be sent later regarding CO-VID-19-related updates, revisions, announcements, and other clarifi-cations. Classes are moving online. What that meant, specifically, the challenges, for students and faculty alike, was not all clear by the end of the day. Hindsight, as the adage goes, is 20/20, and this seemed to ring true in the spring semester of 2020, a COVID-19-plagued semes-ter. My reflections and some of the conclusions that I can draw from this learning semester are recorded in this Documentarian tale.

THE GREAT CALL TO MOVE CLASSES ONLINE WAS TOO ABRUPT, AND STUDENTS RESPONDED WITH VARYING DEGREES OF PROTESTATIONS

First, it was the phone conversation I had with a student. It left me wondering about freedom of choice and learning, how some students might be perceiving the great commission to move classes and instruc-tions online when cities across Illinois were beginning to implement their own lockdowns. My exchange with a student, whom I shall call Henry, was one I remembered vividly because he had made it palpable to me that he was not enthused about online classes, and his "I did not

sign up for this" complaint stuck. It was just the first one of the several excuses I would later get from students like him who were lagging behind as they complained of the tidal waves of the pandemic hitting them on different dimensions.

The reality of the situation, brought about by a pandemic never before experienced by any educational institution, has caused me to reflect on the rejoinder "I did not sign up for this" to understand some of the reasons why some of my students struggled to stay motivated or stopped attending my class altogether as crisis began to take its toll on the country around mid-March. Henry is a very sharp student and a freshman who had recently changed majors. He made insightful comments during our face-to-face class meeting, a week just before the national lockdowns across colleges were taking effect. When our class moved online in the first and second week, he turned in discussion-board posts and essay assignments that were beyond exceptional. He did not seem to have any problems understanding assignment prompts or instructions. But after I had assigned a group assignment, reviewed it in one of our Zoom class meetings, posted the recorded session in the announcement section on Blackboard, and reached out via email to a couple of students who did not seem to be active in our online discussion forums, some students responded with reasons and some others did not, like Henry. In the course of the semester when I followed up with Henry, again, through a phone call for not turning in work or cooperating to work with his peers, it was because his internet service was becoming too slow, as it was being used by multiple people in his household who were working from home and schooling from home. Henry was one of those students who was silent and not proactive to inform me of their struggles. So, I decided to give those students a phone call. They recounted their individual difficulties in the pandemic age to me.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL TO MOVE CLASSES ONLINE IS STILL A LEARNING CURVE

As I reflect on my last week of teaching face to face before colleges nationwide went into lockdowns, many of my peers were as uncertain as the administrators attempting to provide staff and students guidance on what to expect regarding school closures. One college where I teach gave faculty four days to transition to online instruction. Another extended student spring break by one week to give faculty time to plan

and prepare students for online classes. But whether it was a four-day or a two-week grace period to transition online, this was fraught with its own set of problems. It was more work. Not all my students responded gung-ho to the call to continue their composition class online. Many complained that they did not like virtual classes. Preparing students for an online class also means anticipating particular problems students might encounter and problematizing, to a sufficient degree, to mitigate virtual teaching problems. Susan Ko and Steve Rossen excellently observe in *Teaching Online: A Practical Guide* that learning online can be as exasperating for the student as for the instructor, particularly for those taking an online course for the first time. Suddenly thrust into a world in which independent or collaborative learning is heavily stressed, students accustomed to traditional classroom procedures—taking notes during a lecture, answering the occasional question, attending discussion sections—must make unexpected and often jolting adjustments to their study habits (293).

First-time students or freshmen will have their own learning curves to conquer in an online learning space. Whether it is their personal preference for collaborative or individual learning that is emphasized in the online class, students have to make changes to their studying patterns, ones that they are so used to implementing in their face-to-face classes. This means that students' learning preferences and learning styles can and will be impacted. Some students have particular strengths in a face-to-face, collaborative environment where they might easily get away without doing the assigned reading prior to coming to a class session and where live classroom discussions and instructor's response to questions and answers might help them make do with the high-stakes assignments. But those students who are inclined to work individually or have to complete assignments and activities in an online class as an individual, have more responsibilities to complete the assigned readings and activities, and demonstrate their own individual knowledge by completing high-stakes assignments.

Never had I seen as many students struggle in a class as in this plagued semester. Again, I cannot help but recall the words of the student who said, "I didn't sign up for this!" No student in my class signed up to take the class online but was given that option as the only practical choice because face-to-face classes were overruled by local and national lockdown edicts in the middle of March. Never mind the almost daily announcements and clarifications of these announcements

on Blackboard or Desire2 Learn (D2L) that I gave. Never mind the repeated class emails and individual emails that I sent. Never mind the recorded Zoom or Google Meet meetings and live ones that occurred during the regular face-to-face class sessions. And never mind assignment instructions that made references to previous activities or suggested how students should begin the project that I created. Many students struggled in an online class that, rightly, they did not sufficiently plan for or sign up for voluntarily. As such, holding them accountable for that which they had no control over (they were either given a few days to two weeks to transition) did not seem fair. Just as it was involuntary for me to teach my composition classes online, the world was not given any advanced warning and involuntarily went into lockdowns to flatten the curve of the virus spread. In retrospect, I would have had more scaffolding activities to assignments that had been originally designed for a face-to-face classroom to be adapted online. If I saw COVID-19 gradually making its way to the United States as far back as January 2020, I would have signed up for my class to be delivered online and jettisoned my face-to-face lesson plans!

THE INTRICACIES OF THE CALL MADE SOME SYLLABUS POLICIES HARD TO SET IN STONE

To my students, I made it clear at the onset of my classes that I do not accept late work and that this policy is non-negotiable, with the exception that a student who has a reasonable excuse will have given me an advance notice that he/she cannot turn in the work by the due date. But the pandemic made me reconsider this rigid policy. After all, they have more readings and scaffolding activities to complete online. I hesitated to begin grading students' work quickly without getting a near unanimous assignment submission and would often push the deadline back in the hope that some of them would consider it a second chance and submit their work. But some did not. In consideration of the pandemic's impact on my students, I had no choice but to be flexible with expectations to the extent that I felt doing so was fair to others in the class as well.

SOME STUDENTS VIRTUALLY INCOMMUNICADO HAVE DIFFERING COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

There were aspects of preparing students for online learning, made complicated by the lockdowns which prevented in-person classes and

the doleful daily news of the pandemic, for which I could not prepare. Ko and Rossen correctly note that "students' problems fast become those of the instructor as well. Instead of teaching their course, posting information, and responding to legitimate queries on the discussion board, instructors often find themselves trying to troubleshoot technical queries for which they have minimal expertise" (293). Add to this, my repetition of instructions given for an assignment, clarification of directions to help students find class readings and materials, and mediation between individual students working on group projects and who have reached an impasse in communicating with their peers. But I was concerned about retaining my students and not losing anyone from my class. My first reaction was to send out a mass email to find out if students intended to continue the class online. I followed the recommendation given to faculty by the English department chair at Oakton College to drop some lessons and assignments, and as a consequence, lower the total grade points for my class to relieve students of some of the heavy workload they have, coupled with the anxieties that they now have due to the endless negative news of COVID-19. I could only assume that many of my students' attention had been diverted. How do I capture their attention? How can I reassure in the midst of a constant stream of news information predicting darker days ahead? These were some questions I thought about. It seemed that I was competing for their attention and reaction with my regular emails and announcement just as much the news of the day was.

I contemplated many decisions. I opened and read a beautiful email from the director of developmental composition at Oakton. He recommended that instructors "keep things as technologically parsimonious as possible" and "stick with 'familiar' media as much as possible" instead of "introducing the learning curve of fancier technology that's new" to the instructor and the students. I latched onto these words, devising a plan to make follow up calls to students whose online presence had plummeted. I discovered many reasons why some students had stayed incommunicado. While they did not feel comfortable speaking to me about their individual problems or difficulties in an email or during a question-and-answer session on Zoom, many would do so in a text message or in a phone call I made to them or that they made to me. I began calling and reaching out individually to as many students as possible the more I became familiar with their individual pandemic struggles affecting their class participation.

Most of the students I "lost" were the ones who stayed electronically incommunicado with me, and I did not have much success trying to reestablish communication with them via individual emails and phone calls. But I found some success in helping students who were struggling to complete assignments or to follow assignment instructions when I began texting and calling to speak personally with them. But with my classes, I had to send an announcement to my students, follow that up with a mass email, and at times a direct message. It was not uncommon to learn that some students had forgotten about the meeting, had not remembered the Zoom login information because they did not read their email, or some new issue or development had taken place at their homes or workplaces that had prevented them from joining. The more I used low-tech means to communicate with them, the more I found out about one or more problems they were having that they did not feel comfortable discussing in an email or Zoom. In fact, most would not say anything unless I asked them. Once I knew of some students' situations or difficulties, I would give them the benefit of the doubt that they may be struggling to keep up with my class due to their unique problems. Many of my teenage students were dealing with issues that typical working adults go through: break ups, moving, working long hours, child care, etc.

WORKING AS AN ADJUNCT FACULTY IS RISKY; IT HELPS ME UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES PART-TIME WORKING STUDENTS FACE

The precarity of working as an adjunct cannot be stressed enough in an unprecedented time such as this. As Meghan Zahneis points out in her piece for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "The COVID-19 Crisis is Widening the Gap Between Secure and Insecure Instructors," adjunct instructors have a lot to worry about: health insurance, fair compensation for course redevelopment online, student evaluations that will be used to determine their career future (never mind that many of them were given a short notice to move their classes online), decreased wages or job loss due to fallen student enrollment and the current economic tailspin. In one stunning revelation, Zahneis quotes a part-time faculty in her piece saying, "it was made explicit that part-time and non-tenure-track teaching will be the first to be cut in the fall semester if our enrollments decline." I pondered this implication, included the implication of not being around at the end of the academic year, of

being put to the back burner as other faculty that are full time or have seniority are prioritized with class availability preference, of not being compensated sufficiently for the extra work of moving my classes online and using my own equipment for my work. But my reason for working as an adjunct is not because I have to, but because I want to. I love teaching. With the uptick in unemployment rates across the country, many of my students were affected. According to a *BBC Business* article "Coronavirus: Young People 'Most Likely to Lose Work' in Lockdown," more young people are likely to bear the brunt of job loss or to see their income drop due to the pandemic. This rang true in the spring semester as some of my students were furloughed or had their hours at work cut short. But even the ones lucky enough to retain their jobs because they worked for an "essential business" like Walgreens, Target, or Walmart, complained of the impacts from having to work longer hours. This category of students struggled to complete or turn in their assignments on time. Their virtual presence suffered as did their discussion board posts and responses.

PANDEMIC "REFLECTION ASSIGNMENTS" ARE WINDOWS INTO HOW SOME STUDENTS STAYED SANE

Documentation, in my view, does help with reflective practice, not just for students but for the instructor as well. Every semester, I have found it helpful to learn about students' perceptions of the class by having them complete a reflection essay as the last assignment in the class. It was my plan at the start of the semester when I had set in stone the self-reflective questions students in my composition classes that students were going to respond to. The advent of COVID-19 led me to reconsider my plans. I made them write about how the pandemic impacted them academically and discuss their strengths and weaknesses about writing. For my students, in many of the reflections they turned in, I got to read the various ways they were impacted and responded to the crisis. There was the student who said the pandemic meant he had to look after his daughters and participate in an online class as a virtual learner, something that he hates. But there was another student who said that the news coverage on the pandemic was a distraction to him from his studies. Nonetheless, he admitted that the readings that he had to complete and the discussion posts to which he had to respond, were a good distraction from the news coverage. There was a housewife, a first-year college student, who admitted to having a preference

for a face-to-face class because she appreciates the physical college environment rather than an online class. The student admitted that, with the class moving online, she appreciated that it got her out of her comfort zone to work online on projects with different classmates.

Some students had contrasting perspectives. There was an interesting reflection essay I got from a student who said being in a face-to-face classroom keeps him even more accountable. The mere presence of other classmates sitting at close range and the presence of a professor in the classroom, keeps him more accountable than in an online environment. Working from home, the student revealed, was just too comfortable and often leads him to procrastinate more about completing an assignment—that he chooses to play video games when he needs to be studying. There was another student, a returning adult, who said that the last time he took a college class turning in handwritten papers was the norm. While he prefers face-to-face classes, he admits that he found working in an online class, especially with peers with whom he is able to form a good rapport, helpful. This is because he benefits from the work done with them on a collaborative project. But there was this one student who revealed that while he was unprepared for an online class and his family had to upgrade their internet due to it being used by many members of his household, which slowed it down, taking an online class was a good prep for what would have been, had the pandemic not struck, his first online class in the summer, a course he had planned to take. There was another student who revealed that the pandemic placed a huge strain on her personal, academic, and financial life. Though a freshman, the student confessed to being nervous, not being too tech savvy, and being surprised and impressed that she thrived in the class. There was a student who disclosed that while he was always a procrastinator and tended to work on his assignments very close to the due dates, the virtual class led him to make adjustments to his typical routines and to begin working early on assignments that he had to complete. Then there was another student who admitted to learning more about the importance of independent study as face-to-face instructions made him laidback.

Reflective assignments can be a two-way communication between students and instructors. But these reflection essays were also feedback for me on what students would like to see more in a composition class in the middle of a pandemic: more grammar exercises and challenging assignments that will enable them to expand their vocabulary. I have

learned to be more creative with assignment designs and have even gained ideas from students who use available free tools and resources online to complete their assignments. In one class, I assigned a project that would have students working in groups to create an identity for their group's business proposal: one student used a free online logo designer that he had found online. I shared the link with the rest of the class. Some students established group texts as a simple means of staying in touch. Other students worked in Google docs and gave members of their group the shared access to edit and revise the work. The lessons and tales from this pandemic-driven semester are far from over; if anything, they provide us with mirrors that continue reflecting the light of our situation and that of our students.

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