

Keeping the Camera On: Adapting Pedagogy in the Time of COVID

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Abstract

I have had the privilege of offering instruction in English Literature at the College/University level for over 25 years. During that time, I have encountered a broad range of students, from Community College enrollees trying to satisfy an educational requirement for work or certification, 16-year-old Early College students grappling with new intellectual and physical freedoms, to urban classrooms in New York following the tragic events of 9/11. Our recent COVID crisis is today's challenge and it has been daunting, especially for a traditional face-to-face teacher like me. Whether teaching in the United States, or during the time I taught graduate students in Ghana, I discovered that contextualization is critical to most, if not all aspects of literature pedagogy in practice.

The Pandemic has had collateral impacts in many areas of student's lives beyond their health and wellbeing vis a vis the virus itself. Housing and food insecurity for students has grown during this period, at a remarkable rate, as have instances of psychological, physiological, mental health issues and environmental stressors. All these factors impact a student's ability to engage and properly synthesize material introduced during ZOOM classroom sessions impacting their engagement in the learning process.

This paper will explore and discuss strategies utilized to mitigate the impact of these realities on the classroom experience and share methods for successful engagement/learning experience with classroom populations, be they F2F, or synchronous/hybrid/Asynchronous, options in a post-COVID world.

Let us begin to discuss the many collateral impacts that affected many students, particularly of color or first generation:

Students taking on larger roles as wage earners to help families make ends meet. Not long after the onset of COVID in the US, I observed a drastic increase in the number of students in my courses who found it necessary to increase hours at the part-time jobs they had or take on another job in order to assist with family bills. For some this was no problem, but the effect I observed most was a decrease in productivity and a reduction in both on time assignment submissions and the quality of my student's work.

Students were not resistant to acknowledging these causes and effects related to covid, which helped in my efforts to address each student's challenge thoughtfully and independent of decisions and actions I would use to work with their classmates (Vargas Sanchez, 2020).

Housing insecurity. Another drastic and influential change in my student's lives was seen in the area of housing. Many students found themselves without a campus location to call home, and for those not everyone had a home to go back to. Financial issues also contributed to this housing dilemma, the loss of work-study jobs when campuses closed, had a devastating impact on student efforts to pay rent for off campus housing. Another

aspect of this problem concerned those students forced to move back home, often after two or three years of independence. Student stories of arguments and tension “back home” were a real deterrent again to the quality of student work and the timeliness with which that work was submitted. Personality clashes were a common complaint from this group of young people, as often parents chose to treat their daughter/son, as if they were still in high school. Cultural and familial expectations increased student stressors as they attempted to hold onto the most minimal of independence (Rosenfeld Beam Maier, 2020).

Food Insecurity. As the person designated to leave our home during COVID, I observed grocery and convenience stores with barren shelves, and no accurate reports as to when these shortages would be addressed. Be it because of gaps and failures in the supply chain upon which the stores depended, or wide-scale hoarding of basic supplies by families who through panic decided to take all rather than share with others. Job challenges also linked with the empty shelves in student cupboards, which sometimes led to those students being depressed and non-responsive during Zoom classroom sessions. At my institution, the reporting of these challenges in accessing basic food needs to for the most part, went unnoticed, as administrators often were more focused on institutional financial issues, when they should have been addressing the lack of revenue among the student population they should have been serving and assisting (Owens Brito-Silva Kirkland Moore, 2020).

Parental Job Loss. As discussed at the beginning of this presentation, job insecurity presented a huge challenge for my students, especially if their parents, or guardians had been laid off, furloughed or were forced to accept conditions of employment that can be best described as under employment. The psychological damage to students could often be palpably felt, when discussions of this topic were broached, during our class discussions. Observing parents and guardians exhibiting stress and anxiety over these real concerns also had the collateral effect of creating anxiety, depression and loss of focus for their children, my students (Gassman-Pines Ananat Fitz-Henley, 2020).

Taking on Sibling schooling/monitoring to the loss of their own academic experience and coursework. During COVID, it was common for me to see not only the students in the zoom screen, but also their mothers, fathers, and children. Children, often noticeably young ones, were being managed by my students as they tried to answer questions in class time to adhere to my discussion and participation policy, bouncing a younger sibling on their knee, or shooing them away from the camera (Campbell Weingart Ashta, 2021).

Shifting roles within a family as it relates to Parents being undocumented. First generation, black Latinx and poor white students were confronted with additional stress if their parents were undocumented and forced to leave whatever job they had. Their lack of employment or under employment again contributed greatly to psychological stress and a reduction in their class performances and also their attendance (Hill Rodriguez McDaniel, 2021).

Challenges of seeking academic, personal, and social support from campus community. The need for proper isolation, to help reduce the spread of the COVID virus negatively impacted communities where social interaction and community support were counted on to aid students in their school career. Professors unanimously reported that, in addition they had to exchange their professorial hat for that of a psychologist, social worker, counselor, for the sake of their students who were comfortable with and receiving these services pre-COVID (Lisitsa Benjamin Chun Skalisky, 2020).

Genuine fear and a sense of helplessness in the face of a pandemic that has claimed over 600,000 lives. I can say personally that this pandemic tested my ability to address and manage stress, anxiety, and depression. Likewise, students routinely commented when invited to on the genuine fear the pandemic had instilled in them, as news reports kept a ticker going on screen of individuals infected and persons lost to the virus. This ever-present reminding from a 24-hour news cycle gave no respite to students and adults who were affected by the numbers, the loss of persons from within their own family unit, or social circle ([OrnellSchuch Sordi](#), 2020).

Family illness/death in the Islands, abroad or literally at home. Of a particular challenge was the incoming news of family illness and death for students studying from abroad in Europe, the Caribbean and the continent. Already existing challenges in communication were exacerbated by COVID. ESOL students

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especially would present inferior work, and insufficient participation during class time as a result of disconnection from their community networks abroad and family (Yu, 2021).

Mental Health/Illness. Student self-reporting depression, loneliness, anxiety, sleep patterns out of sort, increases significantly as compared to pre-COVID times. At my institution this was magnified by a lack of sufficient counselors and a lack of coordination to assist students in managing these issues and providing referrals for students who needed more professional assistance through psychiatry, and like services (Zhai Du, 2020).

Problems with the online/ZOOM culture. Again, in part because I can speak of using typewriters and carbon paper, during the last century to create and save documents, I was personally frustrated, both because of my lack of facility using Zoom effectively and my student's ability and comfort with the same programming on this platform. Ironically, what they had used with ease, over time they would become disengaged from, for multiple reasons, which include burnout, family stress and internet issues regularly encountered. While others might have experienced unreliable wi-fi or limited technology (no laptop, but use of phones to at least log on with some limitations (Romero-Ivanova [Shaughnessy](#) Otto, 2020).

Recommended Strategies to Address These Issues

Allowing the use of "Good Ol' Fashion' phone calling for contact, conversations and follow up; checking in virtually, on a regular basis. While it is unusual for professors to contact students outside of the classroom setting and email communications, the extra steps to make a phone call for follow up or for a "check in" are key methods to establish and maintain a sense of engagement. The use of WhatsApp or Texting (within established boundaries) for restricted and limited social interaction brought upon by the pandemic, required members of the professoriate to adapt, to ensure the open communication with our students necessary for the maintenance of a healthy classroom space, and positive energies which ensure engagement and student participation in the work of the classroom. Using the methods of communication listed above, faculty members can check in on students about whom they have concerns and maintain solid connections with those who have been actively participating and creating good work as well as those that appear to be struggling with the work.

Providing a small group campus tour with approval and safety precautions

Observed. With the approval of campus administrators whose responsibility it is to ensure safe encounters on campus grounds, consider hosting or assigning upper-level students within your programs to guide small groups of incoming students on campus tours, focusing on new facilities, ice breakers, and upcoming programming. Such events allow students to focus on the future of the campus environment, its goals and objectives during the F2F campus experience that is to come. Projecting faith and a positive outlook in the protocols being required during the pandemic can be accomplished by helping them develop goals from their perspectives as they look forward. Shared with new students, that speaks to the inevitable time after such measures are necessary, and what campus life will look like when that time eventually arrives.

Virtual Social Hour with no agenda. By setting parameters for speech and interaction, faculty members can engage students as students interact with her/him and their peers during a virtual social hour. Giving the students you teach the opportunity to vent on certain subjects also has a collateral effect of creating new directions toward which to focus classroom time and discussion. Equipped with first-hand reports of what students are facing, what they are anxious about and what their wants are within the pandemic, gives faculty members an advantage by aiding in the management of class time and the production of graded work.

Campus Resident virtual Meet-up with Counseling and Community services introduced and offered. Similar to the abovementioned virtual sessions, another effective way to show an understanding of the impact of COVID on members of the campus community is to offer virtual meetings, allowing for discussion, focused on the counseling and mental services that are and will be offered to students in need of such assistance. Though virtual, it allows students to get to know their leadership and possible mentoring opportunities. A parent session can also help in making sure parents can take tips on how to help their student while home. They too,

can meet counselors and medical staff who will provide coping and mitigation methods to family units, helping to assuage concerns regarding the quality and ratios of students to professionals who will assist in these areas, be it virtually, or, F2F, as the world moves from a COVID to a post-COVID footing.

Minimum standards for engagementthe more students are equipped with information regarding expectations related to their classroom presence and work, the greater the accountability that can be expected related to these requirements. During this challenging time, the best advice I received, from my department chair, was to “take it easy,” Not to be confused with lessening rigor and standards, the phrase recommends actively taking into consideration the additional responsibilities students must now shoulder, and providing leeway and an understanding of both the personal challenges which exacerbate student efforts to provide good work, and the traditional academic requirements of faculty and their courses who comprise the students course schedule. This COVID season proved to not only be a challenge for students, but also faculty, and allowed from creativity to rise from this period. Giving writing assignments, as I do teaching literature, I have noticed that assigning the same number of written assignments, but decreasing minimum page length, appears to the students as being given a break, while faculty can then increase focus on concise writing, enabling their students to focus their writing, and encouraging adroit engagements with the assignments and the literature they read for papers.

Listening and observing more closelyPracticing this with focused students along with those who need to be prodded, encourages them to be better students. They can be aided and guided by the faculty member observing and listening more closely to her/his students during class time on Zoom. Keeping an open mind, while “Reading” a student setting (i.e., darkened rooms, kitchens, bathrooms used as classrooms, as well as outside spaces, can assist educators in understanding how those areas have and can impact their work. Zoom sessions where family members are present, for example, may serve as an inhibitor to student participation out of fear of judgement by those family members. Likewise, depression, or depressed mood can be better understood through lighting or background choices students make at home, or wherever they may be joining from. Reading student affect is also important. Body positioning; lying in bed versus sitting at a desk or noting the lack of this as a resource/option for example, can give faculty a great deal of valuable information pertaining to the student’s state of mind and attitude at the time within classes meet. Likewise, reading students’ facial expressions and response to faculty and student contribution to a Zoom discussion will help the instructor understand how “hard,” or “easy” it is advisable to press students for answers to second-level questions, or engagement and participation in difficult discussions.

Private conversations with students in need of assistance or room/space to let it out.Information gleaned about students’ mood and mental condition during class time during COVID, can suggest to the observant educator the need to either forward the student, along with the faculty concerns to the appropriate counselor or service provider. In less immediate situations, the faculty member can offer students the option of joining a private Zoom conversation, to discuss matters of concern. The private and confidential discussion had often served to assuage student’s anxieties and allow them to join in again in necessary class discussions, thus allowing them to again receive the positive feedback form peers and her/his instructor.

Political/Social state of our country.Finally, it is crucial for me as an English Literature professor, to contextualize our classes and existence during COVID against the backdrop of national and international events. Our classes have never existed in a vacuum, and this is even more true as shortages, death, politicization of many issues, contribute to a general state of anxiety, dread and helplessness within all members of a campus community. In addition, police brutality and murder, especially occurring within communities of color, not only sparks protest and civil unrest, but also profound fear among members of those communities being targeted, Black, Hispanic/Latinex, Jewish and Asian American students become fully aware of their status as “Other” within the America of today, often internalize their fears and concerns until faculty members take time out of traditional discussion to allow for conversations to take place addressing these issues during class time. Likewise, ICE arrests, deportations, detentions and ill treatment of minority populations must be addressed as well as safe spaces to discuss these moments to help to stop the inculcations of these racist, sexist and prejudicial into student opinions and behavior.

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Through the introduction of these suggested practices, I believe that as educators and as an institution, we can help stem the growth of negative attitudes and behaviors exhibited by our students in reaction to the incredible phenomenon of Covid here in the 21st century.

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