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Teaching (and Learning) in the Time of Coronavirus

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Abstract

This paper includes reflection and suggestions for practice related to the hasty shift to virtual instruction prompted by the CoViD19 outbreak in the United States. The author uses their positioning as developmental psychology graduate student and lecturer to explore current challenges for students and educators. Suggestions include reflecting on one's own philosophy of pedagogy, and rooting educational practices in a commitment to humanity and justice.

Keywords

higher education, critical pedagogy, virtual instruction

I, like most other people in the world right now, am seeing fundamental shifts in all areas of my life. I'm a graduate student who is teaching an undergraduate course while trying to propose a dissertation, muddle through an elective credit, and juggle additional life responsibilities. Since I don't have a prolific academic career of pedagogic research, and I don't have years' worth of teaching accolades, I'm writing this piece as someone living both as student and educator in a strange and disruptive time. My goals are to both disseminate and document some takeaways from what will likely be a key transition in pedagogy (not to mention politics, society, and culture). And here are my takeaways: Nobody signed up for this. Educators are the "adultier adults" in the room. Sticking with our pedagogical roots and our education goals will keep us from becoming unmoored during one of the worst storms many of us have faced.

We did not sign up for this, but neither did they.

As educators, we did not sign up to hastily rush half a semester of coursework online. We did not sign up to become social workers, academic advisers, and technical experts overnight, even if these were in our five-year plan. We did not anticipate helping students who have lost jobs, homes, family members; we did not anticipate being perhaps the only moment of stability in their lives, even if that was part of our own mission as educators. We did not sign up for our institutions to suddenly demand additional prep work, documentation, and fluency with virtual instruction with not-so-subtle implications that our courses should live on even if we don't.

As students, we did not sign up to have pivotal moments of our education shifted online by folks who chastise us for a few minutes of technical difficulties during group presentations, yet seem to have never opened Zoom until it's time for class. We did not sign up to have universities pull the rug from under our feet, changing goalposts for graduation and saddling our mentors with additional responsibilities when we really need them to be giving us feedback on our papers, research projects, and capstones. We did not sign up to have the requirements for coursework change suddenly and fundamentally with little notice or justification.

I've heard from undergraduate students in my course that their other professors have suddenly become harsher, fixating on things like assignment criteria and deadlines that are impossible to navigate when you don't even know if the WiFi will still be on for class next week. I've gotten bombarded with information from Dean's offices and teaching supervisors about making syllabus adjustments, preserving contact hours, and doing whatever necessary to just finish out these courses. Even with the stakes suddenly raised to literal life or death, it feels as though checkboxes and bureaucracy and accreditation still reign supreme for both students and instructors.

Nobody signed up for this. This was not in the fine print when we became students, educators, or administrators. We need to notice the reflex to push expectations onto someone else, because they didn't ask for this, either. I've found it helpful to ask myself questions that explore connections between my reactions and my context. Why does it feel as though burdens are shifted from administrators onto me as an instructor? Why does it feel as though burdens are shifted from faculty onto me as a student? What are the tensions I'm noticing between administration, faculty, and students, and what contextual factors might be leading to these

tensions? What problems or challenges reveal structural inequalities in how we treat instructors and students? What challenges are revealing a tendency to blame or dehumanize others when we struggle to resolve ambiguity? How can I use my role as an educator or a student to help support others in this transition?

As educators, we are the "adultier adults" in the room.

As we're shifting to meet the new demands of education in a pandemic, I've found my roles shifting, too. I saw a meme once about how even though we're "adults" in terms of age and responsibility and legal standing, we still look for someone with more experience, age, or wisdom when we get scared or face serious difficulty. That is to say, we look for someone who is more "adultier" than we are. I've felt this way myself during this global pandemic, turning to my own parents and mentors for guidance and support. And as an educator, I have the opportunity to be an "adultier adult" for college students who may be suddenly thrust into the scariest, most unsettling life challenges they have yet to face.

In a recent class check-in, I gave every student in my 25-person (virtual) lecture a quick chance to answer the question, "How are you doing?" About a third of students described some relief and comfort being with family and shared that they're enjoying being with siblings or pets that they don't usually get to see. About a third of students described feeling isolated and alone, in empty apartments in an empty city. And a third of students, stone-faced, said that things are difficult and declined to elaborate.

For all of my students, I get to be a source of comfort and authority, even when I don't feel like it. I can do this without overstepping boundaries or blurring the lines of my roles: Holding an abbreviated virtual class provides structure for students who are suddenly lacking the schedule of work, extracurricular activities, and other responsibilities. It provides an opportunity to check in and make sure that students are okay. It allows students to be reminded that we're still working as hard as we can to maintain not normalcy, but stability and connection. None of this is normal, but we can still provide key functions to our students even in the face of a global pandemic. These key functions can include providing structure and stability; offering feedback that furthers professional development despite the loss of jobs or internships; empowering students to advocate for themselves; and creating space for students to make connections between academic, professional, and personal experiences.

A sense of teaching and learning goals can help students and educators alike.

I find strength and comfort in reflection that cultivates the self-awareness of what is important to me and what I hope to achieve with teaching and learning. The ongoing pandemic provides a crucial opportunity to stop and reflect on my values regarding education before putting them into action.

As a student, I believe that education is enduring. It's constant. I can lose my jobs, and I can't guarantee my health or that of my family, but learning is everywhere, and it is forever. The papers I've written and courses I've taken contribute to my sense of self. My professors and mentors are looking out for me even when class is not in session. They're restructuring their

lives and professional commitments to help me, and other students gain the skills and knowledge we need to be successful, even in a global pandemic. Learning is enduring, it is multifaceted, and it is a source of connection and mutual strength.

As an educator, I believe that education is transformative. It offers students the potential to change their lives and their communities. It builds the skills to critically understand inequality and oppression, to interpret scientific facts, to sift through mounds of information and decide for oneself what to believe and how to act. It confers specific knowledge and pieces of information that provide context for medical advances, social changes, and the impact of huge global shifts on individuals and communities.

Understanding my goals and values related to education helps me align my priorities as a student with expectations from professors. It allows me to consider what assignments to spend more time on, and what aspects of a course aren't helping me meet my academic or professional goals (and won't negatively impact my grade or my reputation at school if I let them go). As an educator, reflecting on these values and goals allows me to translate clear, productive learning objectives into relevant course materials and experiences. This is not the first time I've actively reflected on my teaching and learning goals, but the context of a global pandemic has allowed me to dig into what I believe are the most important and meaningful aspects of teaching and learning.

What does this look like for me?

I embrace a critical, transformative approach to education that prioritizes my humanity and my participation towards a more just world. This involves making space for social justice and personal well-being for myself and my students in my own coursework, in my assignments, and in my leisure activities.

This has taken a lot of hard work as an educator. When I moved my 3-hour, 3-credit hour psychology lecture course online, I made intentional decisions based on social media posts and departmental emails with regurgitated best practices. I restructured the course into one hour of 10-minute video lectures, one hour of discussion posts on an online learning platform, and one hour of class virtual calls. This aligned with my personal philosophy and desire to keep students connected. It also aligned with my pedagogic goals and learning objectives of exposing students to key developmental concepts while building critical skills.

I'm making space in our online discussions and virtual check-ins to connect course material to personal experience. I'm teaching Intro to Lifespan Development, so there are ample opportunities to reflect on how developmental theory explains the impact of social distancing on children. We talk about the social, economic, and political factors that influence who is the hardest hit and why. We process together how personal experiences of isolation and fear fit into psychological frameworks of trauma and resilience.

But thinking about critical transformative approaches isn't restricted to my capacity as an educator. As a student, I've thought long and hard about what I need to get out of this semester's coursework. The draft term paper I wrote up for the class I'm taking is not my best work, but is a

triumph given that I wrote it while quarantined far away from my notes and textbooks. Writing that paper was a totally different process than most of my other academic work. I usually like to have an eye towards how my coursework could provide a foundation for published papers or potential side projects. For this term paper, I focused on having a small distraction from a literal plague, meeting minimum course requirements to get a good grade, and disengaging before I overloaded my already tired brain.

I also reflect on my own values and priorities as I navigate course changes or support peers. What would I care about if I were the instructor, and what do I think my professor cares about? Does the deadline feel harsh because it's unreasonable, or because the professor is dealing with other pressures that we don't see? Are course expectations an inconvenience because of pandemic-related issues in my own life, or are they representative of a bigger problem that needs to be escalated to a program chair or dean's office? What could be leading to extra assignments or mandatory video class meetings that last longer than the scheduled class time? Reflecting on these issues helps me decide whether the solution is to get help from a mentor or peer or put myself on mute and drink tea during a class discussion, or ask a professor for clarification on what coursework is necessary under the current circumstances.

I've also made intentional decisions about how to embrace my own humanity across my various roles during a time of mass trauma. My video lectures are not perfect, and you can tell I'm reading from lecture notes for chunks of them. I'm making more time for mugs of tea, video chats with family, and naps than for grading and research. I'm finding memes and articles about self-care and collective trauma and grief to guide myself, my students, my peers and my family members while I desperately cling to sources of income and financial stability. This struggle to preserve my humanity persists across roles and responsibilities and titles – I'm a human first, and a student or educator second.

Conclusion: What can this look like for you?

Whether you're an administrator, educator, or student, reflecting on teaching and learning can help resolve the tensions and ambiguities arising from a sudden shift during a global pandemic. I'm grateful that the administrators of my university have taken steps towards relief and support for both students and educators. For all administrators, I hope that you're in dialogue with members of all levels of your institutions. What are the hopes and fears of your staff, educators, and students? What is your own personal mission for higher education, and how can your decisions and communications help you towards that mission? What new steps has your institution taken towards accessibility, and how can you make sure those steps are still in place as restrictions ease?

If you're an educator, you've probably found yourself making adjustments to assignments, or actively choosing not to make adjustments, all while thinking about the health of your family. As a fellow educator, I encourage you to take the opportunity to reflect on your values and priorities about education. How can we use this time to push for accessibility for all students? How can you be the professor that listens, that cares, that connects students to the university resources that can keep them engaged and enrolled? What opportunities have arisen,

or what problems can't be ignored any longer? As a student, I encourage you to consider what your priorities are as an educator or faculty members. Are you worried about accreditation standards or administrative pressures? How can you work with your students to meet both broader academic requirements and their individual learning needs? I've made phone calls to the registrar's office, consulted with peers and supervising faculty, and taken time to make sure the teaching and grading I'm doing now will still benefit students in the long run.

If you're a student, you may have found yourself having to decide whether to join that virtual class session or spend the time looking for a new job or checking in with family. I can't speak for all educators, but I'm personally much more concerned with making sure students can still learn something than with grades. My expectations for students include space for people to be sick, scared, anxious, and busy. I encourage students to look for the faculty who make space for student needs in their classes, particularly through syllabus requirements and grading policies. As a student, I encourage students to advocate for yourselves. Think first about what faculty and administrators might be trying to accomplish, and then frame your needs within those priorities. Talk to other students or trusted faculty about their experiences. Check the emails from your school with grading policy updates and course changes and talk to multiple people if there's disagreement over how to interpret or implement these changes. And remember that there's no playbook for this. When everyone is making it up as they go along, there can be more room for thoughtful feedback and suggestion.

There's room for strength, humanity and justice even when we're in the midst of struggles that none of us anticipated. We can be patient and flexible with students enduring the worst of it. We can be kind and understanding to ourselves. And we can take this opportunity not to perfect the art of virtual instruction, but to find new areas of strength and resilience. Education can be stability, hope, and transformation, and that's what I'm leaning on right now.