

Note

Critically Considering Empathy in the Classroom: A Graduate Student's Perspective on Pandemic Pedagogy

Brianna Doyle

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

The year 2020 introduced the world to the pandemic that is COVID-19. As of October 6, 2020, there were in the United States alone 7,436,278 total cases, with 209,560 deaths (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). This number of positive cases had skyrocketed from under 1,000 in March, making this pandemic unlike any encountered in the past (CDC, 2020). Due to the severity of COVID-19, the United States, along with most of the world, shut down all non-essential public spaces early on in the pandemic. With that, colleges and universities moved to an online model for the end of the Spring 2020 semester, with many schools utilizing either remote or hybrid classes for their Summer and Fall 2020 sessions. These changes have been challenging, as faculty and students have transitioned to teaching and learning in a time of constant anxiety.

As a PhD student in the Composition and Applied Linguistics program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, I am writing this note from the perspective of both a student in the last semester of her coursework and a teacher of first-year composition before the pandemic as well as during the Fall 2020 semester. From this dual perspective, I will reflect on how the changes that have occurred due to COVID-19 can help educators consider empathy in conjunction with critical thinking.

Pandemic Pedagogy: Restructuring our Classes

Robert Ennis (2018) asserted that the "*concept* of critical thinking that most people actually use is 'reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do'—even though they may not articulate it" (p. 166). Teaching reflective thinking typically involves students doing their research and questioning a given subject in order to evaluate situations and/or texts. However, given that COVID-19 has upended traditional educational practices, reconsidering what "reflective" thinking means in teaching and learning matters now more than ever.

COVID-19 forced colleges to abruptly move online midway through an already planned-out semester. My institution, like many others, extended spring break an extra week in order to give professors and students time to prepare for classes, vacate dorms, and adjust to what was about to be our new reality. Faculty had to modify many aspects of their classes, updating their syllabi to reflect the transition from in-person to remote learning.

Syllabi

Highlighting the need for human interaction and empathy has been a major change to many syllabi, with generosity and flexibility at the forefront. For example, professor Brandon Bayne's (2020) adjusted syllabus went viral for showing compassion for students' individual situations. It includes five principles that may apply to all disciplines:

1. Nobody signed up for this.
2. The human option is the best option.
3. We cannot just do the same thing online.
4. We will foster intellectual nourishment, social connection, and personal accommodation.
5. We will remain flexible and adjust to the situation.

This list echoes other articles and opinion pieces stating the importance of empathy in pandemic pedagogy. An example of adjusting to the situation involves grading. Colleen Flaherty (2020) asked the question, “how lenient, or not, should professors be with students right now?” (epigraph). Flaherty quoted Kevin Gannon in stating, “Grading as if things are ‘normal’ strikes me as the equivalent of giving someone a swimming test during a flood” (“Beyond Pass-Fail,” para. 4). This type of new thinking is critical for students’ wellbeing and success in their classes.

Ted Gup (2020) reflected on how COVID-19 has changed his syllabus in stating, “Slavishly adhering to the existing syllabus would feel like a total abdication of my responsibilities both to them [students] and to myself. While I need not totally abandon the planned curriculum, I will have to continually refocus it and incorporate a wealth of new readings, data, case studies and, ultimately, a new reality” (para. 9).

Changing assignments in response to the chaos and confusion of the global pandemic is one route many faculty have taken. Bay View Analytics surveyed the immediate response to COVID-19 and found that 48% of instructors lowered the amount of work assigned in their courses after moving them online while 32% of faculty lowered their expectations for the quality of the work their students submit (Ralph, 2020). Bayne (2020) reiterated this finding by stating, “some assignments are no longer possible, some expectations are no longer reasonable, [and] some objectives are no longer valuable” (“Principle 3”). While lowering expectations for quality is questionable, expecting students to perform at the level at which they would in “normal” circumstances is unfair.

From a graduate student standpoint, I appreciate the professors who altered major projects, as they understood the physical, emotional, and mental toll the pandemic introduced. Classmates of mine were out of jobs or working from home; home with family, or living alone, worrying about family. Regardless of the situation, we had, in addition to the ordinary stress of graduate classes, new stressors that were unprecedented. One of my professors removed one of our projects in its entirety, as he realized that finishing the semester is more important than overloading his students. As an instructor, I cannot cancel an entire paper or project, due to the first-year curriculum requirements at my current institution, but I am able to work with my students to extend deadlines if necessary.

Community

In this time of constant anxiety and change, academic communities have been disrupted. Students have had to move back in with their parents; other students are alone in their on-campus apartments, hours away from their families. With schools also going online, professors have had to juggle home childcare with work; other faculty have lost their jobs. Graduate students struggle with what is next, as they are not guaranteed the funding they assumed they would be. Gup (2020) went so far as to comment that our students, and we, will not be the same people we were when we left our respective campuses to transition

online, but we need to remain flexible and personable so that our students know they have a place to turn, even if only virtually.

Specifically, in composition courses, community is critical. Writing classes are usually capped at a lower number of students so that they can get the attention needed from their instructor. For example, the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (CCCC, 2013) principles of Online Writing Instruction, or OWI, state that online writing courses are to be capped at 20 students, and preferably at 15 ("Principle 9"). In teaching first-year composition, my classes are capped at 20–22 students, so that I can form a one-on-one relationship with each student to help them improve their writing and gain confidence in their abilities. Depending on the size of the school, composition courses may be the only class where the teacher knows the students by name.

Now more than ever, consolidating community around a common crisis is key in our classes. Ebner and Press (2020) stated numerous distractions that both teachers and students may experience in times of pandemic. These can be anything from mental health issues to physical sickness, to caregiving, to poor internet connections (pp. 11–12). No one signed up to teach or learn during a pandemic, but the situation with COVID-19 can be a teaching tool for how to approach future crises.

What Now?

Writing classes thrive with in-class activities; peer review, conferencing, and a dynamic combination of lecture and supplementary activities work well in an in-person, face-to-face environment. Science classes rely on in-person, hands-on lab work. Other disciplines require fieldwork and internships to gain experience. Although online asynchronous classes cannot be the norm for specific fields, colleges will likely start including online pedagogy as part of their action plans moving forward. The question now is, In what ways can we successfully incorporate online instruction in our schools?

In this time of pandemic, asynchronous activities have found their place in the virtual classroom. While asynchronous lectures and activities are occurring, it is important to remember CCCC's (2013) principles of OWI. For example, OWI Principle 6 states, "Alternative, self-paced, or experimental OWI models should be subject to the same principles of pedagogical soundness, teacher/designer preparation, and oversight detailed in this document." With respect to Principle 6, moving to online instruction was difficult during Spring 2020, as there was no time for teacher/designer preparation, which is vital for all classes. Below are suggestions for how college pedagogy can incorporate principles from composition studies and OWI in face-to-face contexts. With these suggestions, it is my hope that if there is ever another pandemic, faculty and students will have an easier time with the transition.

Joshua Kim (2020) predicted that blended learning, or the combination of online and face-to-face learning, will dramatically rise due to COVID-19. Since instructors and students alike are getting a crash course in online pedagogy, more opportunities for blended learning will likely arise. Kim stated, "We will come back from COVID-19 with a much more widely shared understanding that digital tools are complements, not substitutes, for the intimacy and immediacy of face-to-face learning" ("Prediction No. 1"). Professors will be able to supplement face-to-face lectures with technology in order to better utilize class time.

Studies on blended learning have shown the positives and negatives that can come with a hybrid teaching model. Vaughan (2007) noted that students are grateful for the

flexibility of blended courses, as they are able to control their learning environment. However, students in Vaughan's study also noted numerous challenges. These include taking responsibility for their learning and technology-related problems. In composition classes, students need to manage their time well to ensure they get their papers written and submitted in time for peer review and other feedback, and in a hybrid environment where students do not have consistent reinforcement, this can be especially difficult.

In order to successfully integrate a blended learning environment in our classes moving forward, inclusivity and access must be at the forefront for faculty, as students have different skillsets with technology and/or potential disabilities that inhibit their learning in an online format. Hewett (2015) gave strategies for promoting inclusivity and accessibility in Online Writing Instruction. These include additional training from a university's department of information technology and office of disabilities to assist students with diverse needs by employing audio, video, and transcripts; using accessible PDFs; and introducing software to help students through writing blocks (pp. 77-79). Hewett's list prioritizes different modes of delivery for the same content, so that all students are able to access the materials. While Hewett is focused on OWI, these suggestions may be universal, as students have different learning styles. Moreover, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, amended in 2008, has anti-discrimination laws, but there is a vagueness when it comes to accommodation, so in a blended learning environment, accessibility and inclusion for students with or without a disability need to be addressed.

Concluding Remarks

In no way did I imagine I would be ending my coursework through Zoom videos in my off-campus apartment. Nor did I ever picture teaching during a pandemic. As an educator, I have become more flexible and kinder to my students with regard to deadlines and attendance. With each major project or paper, I survey students to learn their progress to determine if they need more time because my class is not their main concern in a COVID-centered world.

I am able to relate to my students on a personal level, as I am both the student and the teacher in different contexts. Accordingly, I have learned from both my teachers and my students the importance of communication and humanity, as a student's physical and mental wellbeing are more important than a deadline. I make sure to check in with my students to learn if and how I can help them navigate such a trying time because students cannot learn if they are not okay. Just knowing that someone is there, and cares, can make all the difference. This idea is echoed by Lindsay Schneider (2020), who advocated that empathy is the highest level of critical thinking in writing:

So often we spend hours researching and creating lesson plans and activities to encourage critical thinking; we seek out rigorous texts and projects to reinforce meaningful analysis. But the highest and most important analysis we conduct as we read is empathy. Before parsing out the significance of setting, before delving into the imagery, metaphors, symbols, and motifs, we must perform a critical analysis by which we open ourselves to the lives, feelings, and experiences of others. (para. 7)

While the traditional aspects of critical thinking are crucial for successful pedagogy, the pandemic has helped portray why empathy and kindness towards our students and

ourselves matter. Opening ourselves to the lives and feelings of our students helps them to see that they matter and that their feelings are valid, something that is important regardless of what one teaches.

References

- Bayne, B. (2020, April 22). *Adjusted syllabus*. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-6dW8rdzE9mW2DvPi-dPvRxo4sekKlz3VqEpnu4Dwg/mobilebasic?fbclid=IwAR2LxrnLcpVYnHmGTSSsEsb0V6xKiR1-7nDFiOXw5x7fi6qosJzmyuGGI_k
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, October 6). *Trends in number of COVID-19 cases in the US reported to CDC, by state/territory*. <https://tinyurl.com/y97nrsj7>
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. (2013, March). *A position statement of principles and example effective practices for online writing instruction (OWI)*. <https://cccc.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/owiprinciples>
- Ebner, N., & Press, S. (2020). *Pandemic pedagogy II: Conducting simulations and role plays in online, video-based, synchronous courses*. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3557303
- Ennis, R. H. (2018). Critical thinking across the curriculum: A vision. *Topoi*, 37, 165–184. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-016-9401-4>
- Flaherty, C. (2020, April 23). Grading for a pandemic. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://tinyurl.com/y6ujxq4b>
- Gup, T. (2020, April 15). Rewriting the syllabus. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://tinyurl.com/y864qeak>
- Hewett, B. L. (2015). *Reading to learn and writing to teach: Literacy strategies for online writing instruction*. Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Kim, J. (2020, 1 April). Teaching and learning after COVID-19. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://tinyurl.com/y58zpxcc>
- Ralph, N. (2020, April). *Perspectives: COVID-19 and the future of higher education*. Bay View Analytics. <http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/covid.html>
- Schneider, L. (2020, January 31). Empathy is the highest level of critical thinking. *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)*. <https://ncte.org/blog/2020/01/empathy-highest-level-critical-thinking/>
- Vaughan, N. (2007). Perspectives on blended learning in higher education. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 6(1), 81–94.