

Reflections of my Pandemic Year

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I remember distinctly last March when I was sending my students off for spring break that my gut told me they would be gone for more than a week. As my classes were completing, I remember saying, “Look, I don’t know anything, but my gut is saying bring all of your books with you.” Little did I know that they would be gone for the rest of the semester, summer, and fall. I would be gone through the following spring because I am high risk. I thought we would be off campus for a few weeks. Those first weeks of finishing out the semester were a mess. We were required to have flexible deadlines due to communication and internet issues. Our classes were to be asynchronous in order to be flexible. I just wanted to limp along to the end knowing that I had to do better in summer and fall. As scary and uncertain as everything was, I had no idea how much worse it would get for our country, let alone our college.

By summer, we had all accepted the inevitable, and I set up a home office. Our program is a cohort teaching program (MAT), and we start in summer. I knew this new group was going to be online through the year based on the bleak news casts every night. We set up our orientation on Teams, practiced several times, and then we presented a pretty reasonable orientation for our new students. We stripped out the fluff and covered the most needed materials and information. This scaled down model has continued. This year (Summer 2021) we are moving back on campus, and we are sticking with the same schedule that we had online. Students do not want to hear us go on about education on that first day. They are nervous, most of what we tell them leaves their minds, and we repeat it when it is pertinent through their program. Students want the basic information about the program that they need to get started. They want to know that they will be supported by the faculty, and we will know their names and who they are through the program. Lastly, they want to be reassured that they are enrolled in a program where they will be able to get a job at the end of their degree. Our orientation that used to go until three or four in the afternoon will end at one o’clock again this year. It was sobering to realize that students did not really need or want for us to orient them all day long. We had to take an honest look at what we were providing and decide that maybe some of our favorite things were not necessary at this event.

In my summer class, I did a combination of Zoom instruction and asynchronous instruction. This really mimicked the on-campus class that I taught in a hybrid model. I think that most of the students were present in mind and body because I do quite a bit of group work, and when I broke them into groups, they readily accepted the Zoom invitation. Each time groups had to report back, I would leave each with a different central question so the reports would not get boring. In my on-campus summer classes, sometimes students did their work in groups, and I did not have them share each time because they were all completing the same tasks in their groups. However, now I will add a question like, “What helped you most in the group to complete this assignment?” and for another group, “What is the most valuable tool that helped to get this work done?” I think this makes the experience a bit richer and the students learn

from each other about process. Before my questions usually focused on content but working online, I learned that discussing process helped my students learn to be better teachers.

By fall I really knew how to use Zoom, and I was a master of the breakout room! I also could use polls and an interactive lecture software called NearPod. I have recreated my lessons fully in this online environment. Mastering Zoom gave me some long-term changes in my teaching when we go back to campus. In my doctoral classes, I found that conferencing by Zoom with students was an amazing asset. That one-on-one time was very valuable, and I could closely examine and discuss their writing in terms of personal growth. In addition, I now know there is a way to hold class if I need to be off campus. If I need to call in sick because my kids are ill, then I can hold class by Zoom rather than cancelling. If I am sick, if it is a cold, etc. I can still go on. Nothing is worse than cancelling class as I get so far behind. In addition, I live in hurricane country. If we have to evacuate or just close campus, I can keep class going as long as the students and I have power! Zoom has turned out to be a very helpful tool that I will continue to use.

In spring I learned to keep my articles short. It seemed like students were not reading as much or as closely as I liked. Some were not reading. I created group discussions and activities so they knew they would interact with the readings in each class. Yet, there was still resistance. I figured that students might be just as exhausted as I was. I started assigning two short articles on the same topic. This way they could read quickly. In actuality, they were reading the same amount of time, but in shorter bursts. I found professional articles that were designed for teachers that I liked just as much for the content I was teaching as the text book. This also eliminated the text for the class so students had no books to purchase in the spring. Trying class in this new way was successful. I had planned two articles per class and broke the students into groups and asked specific and deep questions for them to discuss and report back to the class. This way each group had something to report to the class that was unique and interesting. Students who had not read could quickly skim and participate. This will continue to be a practice for me. I also think this makes it easy to trade readings out for more current readings on the topic.

I do not ever wish to have a global pandemic again. There were very many isolating moments where I missed the casual conversations in the hallways with colleagues, or running for coffee with a doctoral student, or sitting in my office and writing. However, that does not mean I wish to block out the whole experience. I learned much about my own teaching and think that I can take those lessons with me for future in-person classes. I hope that we return to normal and do not have to retreat again, but if I need to, I can do so with greater confidence.