

**Pandemic Pedagogy Priorities:**  
**I Do Not Really NEED to Teach Anything but My Students**

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On Friday the 13 March 2020, I emailed all my students to check on them and to share the information I had received the day before at a faculty meeting. The school would hold a shortened midterm time the following week and then an extended spring break. I made sure they knew that the dorms would be closed over that break and that, when classes resumed March 30<sup>th</sup>, they would be online. Back then, the end of March or beginning of April was given as when we would evaluate, and while there was anxiety and stress, I do not think anyone could have imagined the events of the next fifteen months. I spent most of spring break converting my classes to online. As I worked the question, I kept asking was, “What did I need to teach?” This question ended up having larger implications and reflecting on this led to me accelerating ideas I was already implementing on grades, student choice, and less traditional English literature or First Year Composition assignments.

The simple fact is none of us should have had to make any of these decisions 2020. All of our staff, faculty, and students should have been able to stay home and prioritize their health and the health of their families without any concern about the consequences (financial and otherwise). Asking, “What do, I need to teach?” soon turned into, “What can I let go of?” and the honest answer, in the middle of a global pandemic and a world full of injustices, was “everything.” The rest was just ego. What my students needed most from me was to know that

I listened when they told me they were scared, stressed, and anxious. They needed the grace and space<sup>1</sup> to work in my class if they were able and no judgement if they were not.

I had always surveyed students to see how they were, and made changes based on this, or had whole class discussions to clarify or explain. Now I started each class asking them how they were. And then I waited until they answered. We had a lot of classes where this took up a lot of time, and some days it was just a few minutes, but my students knew I did not just ask them, but I listened and then, most importantly, made real changes to the class to help. When they said they were overwhelmed trying to do all the work for classes, many online with professors who did not know how to teach online, I cut readings and workloads. We spent longer on fewer texts. When majors told me they were stressed about grades and GPA and graduating, we had a conversation that grades were not who they were, that it was okay to prioritize their physical and mental health, that a “C” was okay, and that if they were graduating and not applying to graduate school they really did not need to stress about their GPA. I told them it was okay to take the pass/fail option if they wanted to. Some students struggled with the lack of focus on grades, however, most students told me that they really appreciated how I listened to them, cared, made changes to help them. Students, whether they were in my General Education classes or my English major ones, mentioned repeatedly that I really cared about my students and how this helped them, regardless of how they ultimately did in the class. Many students shared in end of course reflections that they were more comfortable revising materials or using assignments to explore, since they knew there would not be penalized while others said the flexibility helped them deal with the less-flexible parts of their lives.

Before the pandemic students did grade conferences, reflected on work, demonstrated skill in projects, presentations, and unessays. I did not have an attendance policy or penalties for late work. I realized that the only thing that mattered was my students.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not know the source for this phrase. I can share that I never heard it until the pandemic, and then suddenly I saw it all over my social media, as Black educators, most of them women, started using it, and as they do with so much, providing a model for the rest of us.

I made sure I was explicit and explained in detail why I did these things. They emailed work with grade reflections, and I explained that meeting the minimum requirements was automatically a C. I emailed back detailed feedback. Previously, students submitted work through the Learning Management System, and I left in line comments which were detailed but focused on fixing individual issues or elements. Now I still used “insert comment” to point out examples in the text for revision, but I found myself returning to my Peter Elbow and asking more questions, framing my response as a reader. I also emailed the students back these drafts with detailed holistic impressions in the email that included what I really liked, what resonated, as well as some general ideas for them to think about for revision and improvement. When students emailed me saying they could not come to class, often sharing heartbreaking, awful reasons, I told them I hoped they were okay, to let me know if I could do anything, and while I always wanted to hear how they were, they should do what was best for them and not feel like they had to share anything they did not want to. I realized that I could not control so many of the things making my students’ lives harder, but I could control my classroom environment, face to face and online. I cut course policies and rewrote others to support students. I explained the pedagogical reasons behind my course design, why I assigned readings, and when I made changes it was to reflect their interests and needs. Before I had always built in a lot of choice for students into my classes from readings to activities. I would have told you that I was a student-centered teacher, but I was still working within a system and framework that the pandemic revealed was actively harming students, so I tossed it and started over. I spent the summer thinking about what my students struggled with, what they shared worked in their end of class reflections, what they needed, and built my classes around that. I realized that I did not really care if my students came out of my class knowing Shakespeare’s plays, or the History of the English Language in the middle of a global pandemic. I cared about was whether my students would live, be okay and then I told them that and followed through in every class and interaction.

The answer to “what do I need to teach?” is my students. I need to create an environment where my students can learn, where they know they matter, and that there is

help if they need it. I need to teach them material they can engage in, that they can respond to, ask questions of, think about. That what I need to teach is not as important as who is learning. I learned that letting go of the idea that I must dictate or control everything resulted in great surprises as students choose their own topics to read, research, and present. That the creativity and effort they put into presentations and projects and portfolios that they chose went well beyond anything I could have designed. Freeing myself of content I thought I had to teach, how I thought I had to teach, enabled me to make space to listen to students and offer individual help. It freed up time to write lengthy, detailed feedback on multiple drafts and forward to them research and sources based on what they were interested in.

I realized just how little I need to “dictate” or control, and that the most learning happens in the empty space I create. For me, the idea of “grace” means from day one I tell students they are adults who can make decisions and that informs my class not policing behavior. My class is designed to give them the space to do this, not just as in the time, but to create a class environment, what K-12 teachers often call culture, where they feel comfortable doing this work. I talk about the work the class will do, why I designed it the way I did, why I think the work matters, and how they will choose, shape, design the class. I explain that I am interested in their learning, not their grade. I tell them that I want them to grow over the course of the semester. For me, these are the things I will carry forward with me.