

Reimagining and Reframing: Using Appreciative Education Techniques During COVID-19

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It is tough to connect with students as a Black man, especially when you are new to your institution in virtual settings. As social constructions, race and gender are the most salient identity markers for me, and they determine how I navigate in-person educational environments. Amid a global pandemic, I began my assistant professorship. What I didn't anticipate was how COVID-19 would challenge my beliefs, ideas, and perceptions about teaching in my new role. Prior to this position, I primarily taught undergraduate courses and aided faculty colleagues in teaching graduate courses as a doctoral student. My socialization as a college instructor taught me the mechanics of how to develop course syllabus, create lesson plans, facilitate classroom dialogue, and construct student centered classroom spaces, but never in virtual environment. This traditional approach served as roadmap for me as I explored methods of teaching to spark deeper learning as an early college instructor. My goal has always been to push students to think differently about the world we inhabit and how our work could advance the field of education. While I kept this same goal throughout the pandemic, I wrestled with new methods to foster students to push traditional ways of thinking and to see themselves as advocates of equitable education in our ever-changing global society.

Before the pandemic, my courses were designed to explore ways to interconnect learning, build rapport, and have difficult conversations around social justice issues. Teaching in a student affairs personnel program, my goal is to teach student affairs practitioners how to work in collegiate environments. As such, our social identities and lived experiences are vital to understanding today's college student. The pandemic called for my classroom instruction to be relegated to an online environment and for the first time, I lost the ability to connect with my students in person, which was critical to my pedagogical practices. This shift caused me to adjust my instruction tactics and employ a method designed to truly meet students where they are, in this case, on the other side of a computer screen. Maintaining my beliefs that learning happens in communal spaces, even virtual communal spaces, I adopted Bloom and team's six phases of appreciative education. Bloom and collaborators (2013) acknowledge that "appreciate education is built on the notion that knowledge is contracted through collaboration" (p. 6). My approach to teaching is strongly connected to my ability to foster collaborative relationships with students. As such, the appreciative education framework allowed me to foster and build these connections in a virtual space. Appreciative education, as defined by Bloom and colleagues (2013),

provides both a theoretical infrastructure and a flexible framework for educational practice. Instead of focusing on either individual or organizational development, appreciative education celebrates the development of a framework that is interactive,

transformational, adaptable and can be used to guide both individual interactions and organizational efforts (p. 8).

This framework was different for me as I centered so much of my instruction around lived experiences and identities. My course delivery evolved to encompass interactive and transformational techniques in a virtual environment, allowing me to be more versatile and adventurous in my course construction. Bloom and team (2013) position six phases as critical to this framework: disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, and don't settle. Each phase is interconnected, causing me to rethink my virtual interactions.

- **Disarm** or phase one acknowledges the power dynamics and calls for a safe environment where all members of the community are valued. This shift for me was central during our first class meeting. My students and I used virtual tools to construct rules for our digital learning environment that we could revisit often. Normally this would be an exercise we would conduct in person, and the white board would be erased. However, in an online format, we were able to persevere this list as a living document that we could update periodically, which we did frequently, as controversial topics around race, gender and other marginalized identities arose.
- **Discover** focuses on using positive open-ended questions to learn the perceptions and values of the community. This became a regular practice as our synchronous web video classes, which began with questions that connected course readings to practical experiences to develop students' educational competencies. As a learning community, students would ask open ended questions to challenge each other as new knowledge was formed in the nexus of challenging and supporting each other. While this was not a new practice for me, it did serve as a reminder of the value of student-centered discussions.
- **Dream**, the third phase, is built on the significance of building both individual and organizational visions. In the virtual environment, "dream" became a method for thinking about how we could adapt this learning space into other environments. For example, how do we increase learning in an academic environment? This question became a continuous question for the class. At the conclusion of our synchronous sessions, closing questions center how we could do our jobs better as educators, leaving students with thoughts to ponder after class. Prior to this, I would frequently ask students to leave class to write a one-minute essay, which did not allow for much interaction; however, this adjustment significantly enhanced student involvement.
- **Design** is used to define an action plan to achieve the dream. In my classroom, this became how we would challenge preconceived notions on college students. As educators we often think students come to campuses as empty vessels, but they come with a host of ideals, experiences, and identities. I used this phase to incorporate who they were as educators into our virtual classroom. Our debates and classroom dialogue centered the construction of a plan to better serve college students, which was different, as we would

often discuss readings or course material. This approach shifted my classes from being knowledge acquisition based to problem solving think-tanks to strategize how to serve improve communities and often left my students to wrestle with problems, which often involved using reaction features should as “raise your hand or thumbs up” in Zoom.

- **Deliver** centered on my students figuring out how to move from designing a plan to implementing it. Towards the end of our semester, students determined what methods they could use to better assist students in their transition to college. The techniques we discussed in class were taken and modified for their virtual interaction with students in their professional roles. From open ended questions and discussion, our digital learning space shifted to investigating ways for students, as college administrators, to help each other in their respective roles. The learning space moved from a student and instructor space to a consortium of scholars sharing ideas, perspectives, and opinions to shape college student experiences in their respective roles as student affairs professionals.
- **Don't Settle**, the final phase, is a reminder to continuously keep trying. This was enacted in the final presentations, where students created tools and strategies for student affairs practitioners to support students in online learning environments and to continuously challenge the status quo. On a personal note, this phase is a significant one for me as a faculty member. Like many faculty members in various disciplines, we are all exploring methods to improve student teaching. Don't settle prompted me to always look for ways to improve and enhance my course design approaches for future students.

Appreciative education propelled me to rethink my position as scholar and educator. In conjunction, during the pandemic, I took the time to reflect on how these six steps influence my goal to push students to always think critically and ask challenging questions. I often encourage students to think about how power and privilege are inherent in all academic spaces. Moreover, how they must be tempered radicals in educational spaces. Meyerson (2001) states tempered radicals,

want to succeed in their organizations yet want to live by their values or identities, even if they are somehow at odds with the dominant culture of their organization. Tempered radicals want to fit in, and they want to retain what makes them different. They want to rock the boat, and they want to stay in it (p. xi).

The appreciative education framework allowed me to foster a community of tempered radicals to challenge the norms of higher education, in a virtual environment, while creating a space for shared learning, dialogue and creativity. New methods beyond traditional ways of learning because of the pandemic, enhanced my ability to training the next set of student affairs administrators. As a learning community, we transcended traditional methods of reading and regurgitating information, but created a space where we encouraged, challenged, and explored new methods to learn with and from each other, a process in which I will duplicate for years to come.

References

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