

Discussion Boards and the Human Side of the Classroom Post-Pandemic

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Since I started teaching college math, I never imagined doing anything else. After all, this is why I pursued a PhD. Teaching while I was a grad student is what kept me going, it fed my soul and helped me stay focused through the difficult work. Like so many others, I questioned my career during the pandemic. I was on maternity leave that spring when everyone made the transition to remote learning. I was navigating life with two kids, and I was emotional, terrified, trapped, and so cut off from the career I loved. I felt so far behind my colleagues. Sure, I was thrilled I wasn't dealing with the remote transition mid-semester, but by summer it felt like they had figured out how to navigate the next academic year while I was left behind.

My university offered training that summer, and I enrolled in a workshop. In all honesty, it made me feel so much worse at first. I remember calling my department chair asking how bad it would look to the dean if I didn't finish the training. How was I supposed to redesign a course for online learning when I had never taught or taken an online class before? My peers were posting thoughtful messages on the discussion boards, and I felt inadequate and out of place, like I had nothing meaningful to contribute. For the first time in a long time (read: high school history class) I hated learning. It was a jarring experience – how many of my students feel like this in my class?

The best thing that came out of the workshop, and the thing I will take with me far past the pandemic, is the use of online discussion boards. During our year of remote learning, I assigned discussion boards in all my classes for the students to engage in. At first, I considered having discussions related to course content, but then I decided I wanted the topics to serve as a way for us to build a classroom community. Some of our discussions include:

- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What kinds of things do you want to try in the meantime? What are some goals you have? What do you hope the world is like? *(By no means does this have to be a perfect plan! I still don't know what I want to do when I grow up!)*
- How are things? Just a quick check-in to see how things are after the first couple of weeks. What are your thoughts on Precalculus? How are other classes? Is there information from the university about Covid or other policies that is confusing or missing? Technology issues?

- What if you could talk to your past self or your future self - what would you say? What advice would you give? Pick a time - any time in your past or your future that you want to talk to yourself!

The students had to post their own response and reply to at least one other response for credit. Though some students did the minimum, I was surprised by how many students replied to multiple posts. They were really engaging with each other in a way that I'd never had the chance to see before. I have always done mid-semester "How's it going?" check-ins where the students answer some questions anonymously. Nearly every time, half of the responses are one-word "fine" or "I will study more" terse replies, giving me no indication of what I can do to help them succeed. This was the first time I had seen well thought out, personal responses from everyone (maybe having it as a tiny part of their grade helped). I'd like to think it helped that they knew their peers would be reading it.

The peer support and encouragement blew me away. In one class a young mother who had just moved to the area was struggling to make connections in the community. She used the discussion boards to make new friends and exercise partners. In another, a trans student used the forum to re-introduce himself to former classmates after his transition. I had members of the LGBT+ community discussing how they wanted to leave the country depending on the outcome of the 2020 election with their peers responding that there is always place for them here.

I needed this! I needed to remember that my online students are actual people, which seemed harder to do from behind a screen. I needed to hear that they were struggling the way I was struggling. I needed that personal connection and to be in on their personal conversations, in their inner circles. Too often I've fallen into the content of the class and let the context of my students' learning environment get brushed aside. Sure, I used to talk to students and make some personal connections at the beginning and end of class, but this was the first time I could connect with *all* my students. I could hear from the quiet students, the marginalized and most vulnerable students.

I guess what I'm trying to say is I realized I had lost the human side of things. In the daily shuffle and the looming tenure application, I lost why I started in the first place. Yes, I always held those connections to my students and the *math* – opening their minds and watching them grow as mathematicians – but somewhere I lost why I chose this career in the first place. I lost that I am a guide in their journey into adulthood, that I am a translator about college to the first-generation students, and that it's my job to teach them much more than math. Going forward, I will bring personal check-in discussion boards with me into my face-to-face courses because it is a reminder that I have the opportunity and the obligation to connect with each student on a personal level, to check in with them and see how I can offer individual support. Though certainly not an innovative idea, I'm sure I'm not the only one who needed a little reminder.