

A Case for Grace: Dealing with Inequity Pre and Post Pandemic

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Like many in the educational world, I spent a significant part of 2020 staring into the middle distance with caffeine in hand, wondering how I was going to get my students through our content while the world fell apart around us. And yes, as so many think-pieces in the era of COVID will proclaim, my approach to education changed—but only to double down on what had been there before, a belief that our educational model needs to be crafted around the socio-economic realities of our students.

COVID-19 exposed to new eyes the connection between academic outcomes and social inequities. For those of us who teach students who are not of privileged background, however, this is hardly news. The past year has made into front page news what was seen regularly on our campuses before: students who are on the economic brink, students who are overburdened by work, family, and class, and students with lingering issues of academic preparedness from their prior education. Just one nudge of fate (and COVID would certainly count as more than a nudge!), taps the dominos leading to academic implosion.

Most instructors working with students in these circumstances have adapted some elements of flexibility into their courses. I had, in fact, created my pre-COVID courses with the working adult in mind, a person who could only work in brief chunks of time. Thanks to COVID, however, I deliberately increased the prior level of flexibility within the syllabus through three new policies.

- Get Out of Jail. As any “Monopoly” player knows, a Get Out of Jail card allows the player to spring free of the game’s penitentiary. The “Get Out of Jail” system in my course works

similarly. Students are given two virtual cards that they can cash in in lieu of specific small assignments. For the sake of the pandemic, I added a third chance. For each GOJ card “cashed in,” the student receives the credit for the work, but does not have to actually complete it. Why do this? 1) The course is already built on frequent small-stakes work. Missing a two-point assignment in a 100-point class will not damage the student’s learning overall, nor will it fundamentally change the student’s grade. 2) What it does change is the student’s perception of their state of stress. If they are overloaded with projects, for example, in other courses, they can choose to step back from a weekly small assignment and not damage their grade.

- Grace periods. As the minutes tick by to deadline, disasters both real and those, shall we say, just slightly suspect, happen. While for some students, of course, the issue is time management, in the era of COVID, where my student’s children might be home schooling in the background (and/or be merrily hurling erasers at each other, as my middle school nephews did during my own efforts to work), normal expectations of time management seemed, frankly, unfair. I therefore instituted a 48-hour grace period on assignments. I advised my students the grace period was there to offer flexibility, not to change the deadline, and that I expected they would use it as needed. As a result, I had no students pleading to turn in late work.

- Spring break. My university opted to delete the classic week-long spring break as it may have opened up possibilities of travel for campus students. While this move was understandably wise for campus physical health, for mental health, especially for those off campus (i.e., most of my students), I knew this was going to be incredibly difficult. I therefore rebuilt my syllabus explicitly so students could take a week off at a time of their choosing. Our classes were already asynchronous and online, so flexibility here did not increase the likelihood of travel/viral exposure. In this system, students would advise me of a week they would be “off.” They would receive either credit or an extension on small assignments due that week, and they would be responsible for knowing the content for the exam.

But why does all this matter? For me, I knew my choices were right when I read a note from a student who worked in a major shipping service. During fall/winter 2020, global shipping exploded—which meant for workers like my student, they were stuck between the needs of their employment and the closing weeks of their academic term. Despite the fact my policies amounted to just small syllabus tweaks, my student thanked me for them, saying they made a tremendous difference in his stress and academic achievement at the end of the term. He was not alone; I heard from many students reiterating that these gestures of understanding meant a great deal to them. Ultimately, I lost count of how many students thanked me for making space for mental health in our course.

And that is why I leave the memory of 2020-2021 even more committed to designing my courses with these students, these working adults, in mind. Science will help us to respond to and get past this virus, but the fragile, over-burdened socio-economic reality of our students remains. Until our world treats inequality as the crisis—another pandemic, if you will—that it is, the need for flexibility in our pedagogical approach will remain my biggest takeaway from our COVID experience.