

Lessons Learned from Pandemic Teaching

Wendy Calaway

University of Cincinnati

Vulnerability is at the core of my teaching philosophy as a criminal justice professor. Teaching from a place of vulnerability allows for sharing, co-learning, taking risks and admitting when you might not know. From this perspective, teaching and learning become collaborative activities where educators allow themselves to be seen as fully human, on the journey with students, gaining new perspectives on the world together. In a traditional face-to-face classroom, there are many opportunities to make these authentic connections with students. In the “before time” this could take many different forms. On campus, spontaneous opportunities are routinely available to interact, talk about life, and connect. I started to notice the power of connection, in 2016, when I took on the role of advisor to a student group. Working with students outside the classroom allowed us to get to know each other in a way that the traditional classroom model did not. I found that the more I was able to connect with students, the more vibrant they became in the classroom. I learned that the key was sharing, not just what I know, but who I am. I talked to them about my passions, my strengths and weaknesses, and my opportunities for growth. In class discussions, I exchanged ideas with students and learned from them as much as they learned from me. Both in class and outside of class there was a real exchange of ideas and humanity. We know that connection is the key to persistence, and while traditional academic models have created distance between the knower of knowledge and the receivers of knowledge, a willingness to be seen as a person provides for a more robust educational experience.

The move to fully online teaching happened in the middle of a semester in response to the global pandemic and immediately presented challenges to the creation of an educational experience of connection upon which I had been relying. Admittedly, my immediate concern was not necessarily how to create a vulnerable learning environment, but to make sure students knew how to access the learning platform and to gain confidence that I could present materials effectively during this transition. As I experimented with synchronous and asynchronous formats and tried to provide interesting and thought-provoking materials online, I was faced with the obvious fact that the course was flat and lacked some intangible quality.

After stabilizing the basic course set up online, I realized that the intangible quality that was missing was connection – the humanness of the experience. At first, I tried to re-create the face-to-face experience through synchronous class meetings. However, the stress of the pandemic for students and the overwhelming nature of the sudden shift in learning could not be

overcome in a video meeting – I could not replicate what I did in the face-to-face classroom in an online classroom. I had to think of another creative way to be authentic, show students that I was present, connected, available to them, and not simply a robot on the other side of the screen. Ultimately, after trying synchronous meetings and relying on discussion boards and a group project I landed on two modalities that I plan to continue to use in my online and hybrid classes. These techniques allowed me to show up for my students in a more human way and to create a learning experience that was more personal.

The first exercise involved short periodic videos where I talked about a current issue. I took quick videos of myself outside in my garden, in the kitchen, at my office, in the car, or hanging out with my dog – allowing students to see me in my real life. I shared with them a comment about an important news item of the day connected to our material. I talked about data I was collecting on a project that could inform our thinking about a course topic. As a criminal justice professor, I spent a lot of time talking about current events of 2020 that fit in precisely with our course work on race and the criminal justice system. These short videos allowed students a window into my life and my thoughts about what was happening in the world. This required a fair amount of vulnerability on my part. As a natural introvert, I had to push past my own reticence to let people in so that students could see that I too was stressed by the pandemic, and I too was stuck in the house worried about the future. Despite these conditions, I wanted them to know that we could come together and use the time as a community to think about our course material in the midst of the circumstances. Even outside the confines of a pandemic lockdown, I can see that this way of showing up for students will have value because even outside the confines of a pandemic the need for connection remains. As learning platforms continue to evolve, I will be able to connect in a more authentic way with online and hybrid classes in the future. Traditional face to face classes too will benefit from these techniques, allowing me to reach students who may not speak up in class or participate in traditional extracurricular activities.

In the second exercise, I leveraged Twitter to connect with students and helped demonstrate the impact of our course material in real world settings. I set up an extra credit project where students could follow me on Twitter and periodically choose one of my Tweets to comment on. I set up instructional videos on how to do this and guidelines for what kind of commentary students had to provide. This allowed students a window into my world as a professional outside of the classroom. I use Twitter to connect with other legal professionals and academics, to stay current on emerging research and trending case law, and to educate the public around current issues in my field. Students were able to see the things that I read, liked, and tweeted about. I encouraged them to look at the list of experts I follow and choose others in the field they were interested in and follow them as well. This project also required some vulnerability on the part of the students who had to elect to publicly choose a topic of interest and share their thoughts, creating a more complex connection between us. Because they were working with news reports, academic journals, or other real time access to materials outside the traditional classroom, it got the students and I talking about current events, which were related to our course, outside the traditional learning platform.

The pandemic changed me as a person and an educator. It further cemented the idea that I do not serve my students well by showing up as a remote, all-knowing sage. Students learn when they feel safe to be open and that does not happen unless I am willing to be vulnerable. These are the lessons and the techniques I hope to carry with me into the next semesters.