

**A Global Pandemic Served as the Spark for an Experienced Faculty Member
to Adapt and Grow**

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The past year and a half has left an indelible mark on my teaching philosophy. I am no longer the same. My students are no longer the same. Our institutions are no longer the same. No one was prepared for the changes brought upon institutions of higher education when a “mysterious coronavirus” in Wuhan, China, became an international crisis. In March 2020, with cities, counties, and states issuing lockdown orders, universities were forced to send students home, and faculty were required to teach remotely, whether they had the necessary skillset or tools to do so. Fortunately, although I was teaching in-person classes at a traditional state university, I also had over 10 years’ teaching experience online. While one may have thought this prepared me, it did not. The unique challenges, emotionally and psychologically, of this period showed me I had much more to learn.

The “Before”

I considered myself an above-average instructor. An excellent one, even. Prior to the pandemic, I worked hard to make sure I came to my lectures prepared. Known as a bit of a jokester, my lectures were lively and interesting; students regularly commented that my humor helped make the content more interesting and easier to retain. My assignments were thought-out and clear. There were scaffolding assignments built in, when appropriate and needed. I used the learning management system to send out messages occasionally to students who were struggling. At the end of every semester, I reviewed my students’ surveys and adjusted elements within my courses when recurrent issues were revealed.

Those components of my instructional approach were positive ... and I do still think I was a good instructor. There were bad elements to how I approached my teaching, though. Although my student surveys from the Spring 2020 semester were mostly positive, there was a marked difference from “normal” semesters; there was a different tone as students experienced unprecedented stress during the pandemic. These were brought to light during the Spring 2020 semester when the transition to virtual instruction first occurred:

- I had an inflexible late policy that did not account for the non-academic demands the first-generation students who primarily make up my campus deal with.
- My outreach to struggling students was inconsistent, generic, and lacked actionable steps for them to take; this potentially frustrated students and left them feeling adrift.
- The virtual instruction I provided was void of humanized elements and potentially left students without necessary social connections and support systems.

The Pandemic

I realized my students were balancing family obligations, which likely increased during the pandemic given the high percentage of Hispanic students at our university who come from migrant farm worker families. They were also struggling with the same emotional realities of the pandemic that I was. It was clear I needed to make changes for the sake of my students. Perhaps more striking, though, I realized I needed to make changes in my approach for myself, as well. I entered higher education to help shape the future leaders of healthcare, teaching in an undergraduate health sciences program. When I was not meeting my students' needs, I was also not fulfilling my professional ambitions.

Flexibility

First-generation students are balancing a lot of responsibilities and have already overcome many challenges to participate in a college course. I had good intentions with a strict no-late-assignments policy: teaching my students time management, responsibility, and professionalism. However, the primary goal should be their *learning* of the content. Students with overwhelming responsibilities were more likely to fall behind with their assignments; my late policy discouraged them from completing the work, since they would receive no points. These students, therefore, missed out on the learning process of completing the assignment.

There was, after all, a reason I spent so much time carefully drafting these assignments. During the pandemic, I accepted all late work, without penalty, to encourage students to learn and to practice compassion during these challenging times; showing my students compassion is something I consider important given their future careers in healthcare and plans to work with patients. This helped encourage students, despite falling behind for whatever reason, to spend time engaged in the learning activities of the course.

It must be considered, though, if students were still learning time management, responsibility and professionalism with a flexible late policy. While I have established a career in higher education, I previously worked in healthcare for over 20 years. As any professional can tell you, there are times when reports, projects, or other tasks are late. The key, though, is communication. I offered flexibility on the assignment due dates for my students, but I simultaneously stressed and required the need for them to communicate with me if an assignment would not be submitted on time; we would then work together to establish a new,

mutually agreeable, due date. Thus, my students did still learn these essential job skills, they simply learned them a different way.

Outreach

Rather than using generic messages that were blasted out to all students who were underperforming, I started identifying specific reasons students were struggling, and communicating that directly to each student. I provided students with actionable items to improve their learning and offered additional support directly from me, if they wanted it. Unfortunately, this was a time-consuming process, but it provided each student with an action plan to address their class performance and improve. This extra effort proved worth my time as student attendance at synchronous virtual meetings increased, performance improved, and students acknowledged the effort in their surveys completed at the end of the course.

Humanizing

Students, like all of us, are social creatures. The social aspect of life is something that was severely hampered throughout the pandemic for many of us, increasing feelings of stress, depression, and isolation. Pacansky-Brock et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of humanizing online classes by letting students see the personal, non-academic side of instructors. To foster a human element, I posted socially-oriented videos throughout the term of me engaging in various activities: hiking, walking on the beach, or sitting in my backyard while also updating students on class assignments. I also opened synchronous virtual class meetings with music playing and used VoiceThread collaborative technology to provide an online space for peer-to-peer interactions.

I enjoyed the social environment these activities created as much as my students did. As mentioned, I tend to make jokes in my classes and try to keep lectures upbeat. It was difficult to do this with synchronous virtual meetings and much more difficult with asynchronous classes. These socially-oriented videos, introductory music, and VoiceThread activities allowed for me to share my personality with my students and create the bonds with them I normally would have in a traditional classroom. This, in turn, created an environment in which students felt more comfortable to approach me when they needed help.

The “After”

Not only has my teaching changed through this experience, I have also changed. I have a greater understanding of my students' challenges, and my focus is solely on their learning rather than the logistics of my courses. My students are here to learn, and I am here to facilitate that process. To that end, I will be retaining a more flexible late policy: although there will be due dates, there will be a one-week grace period without penalty. My courses will continue to have humanized elements: I have already recorded a welcome video to email out to my students for the upcoming semester, which highlights my personality and establishes social connections with them. While I will continue to reach out individually to struggling students, this is a work in

progress. It is a time-consuming process that I need to refine so that students get the most out of it while being manageable despite my full teaching load.

References

Pacansky-Brock, M., Smedshammer, M., & Vincent-Layton, K. (2020). Humanizing online teaching to equitize higher education. *Current Issues in Education, 21(2)*, 1-21.