From Zoom Back to the Classroom:
Lessons Learned from Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The transition from in-person to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed my philosophy and pedagogy as a social work educator. Students simultaneously dealt with a pandemic and bore witness to continual civil unrest in the form of the continuous murder of unarmed Black people by the hands of police, anti-Asian discrimination, and continual political conflict regardless of political affiliation. Each week, it seemed like a new story in the media added another burden one of my students had to carry into the classroom. My teaching strategy before the pandemic was conversational. I rarely lectured to students unless there were challenging concepts. The best way for students to grasp material is to have a conversation amongst the collective group to understand how everyone processes concepts and assess their ability to apply them to real-world examples. Moving to an all-online platform came with challenges based on the traditional approach I was used to taking. Not only did I have to develop a plan to ensure students were able to grasp necessary course material, but I also had to consider how students would show up each week. This called for providing as much flexibility as possible within reason. During the 2020-2021 academic year, I taught courses related to Prison Abolition, Police Torture in Chicago, and Social Welfare Policy. I was pleased and surprised by how much I learned from online teaching and all the tools I adopted and will utilize as I transition back to in-person instruction.

The first strategy I will continue to use once classrooms are back in person is utilizing creative forms of expression such as music and art during class. To get students excited and ready for class, I used the share screen feature in Zoom to display some form of artwork while music played for the first 5 minutes of class and during our 15-minute break period halfway through the class. Students played a vital role in the music that was played during class. One requirement for my courses was weekly discussion posts. Inspired by Audre Lorde's Poem "A Litany for Survival," I asked my students to create their own "Playlist for Survival." They picked three to five songs that inspired them, regardless of their mood, and posted a link to the song with a couple of sentences explaining why. I created a playlist from that discussion post, and I incorporated student's song selections for all following classes. Though this may seem small, students were always excited to see what songs I would play, and everyone seemed to appreciate contributing to the course in that way. Having access to smart technology via speakers and projectors will make it easy to transition from Zoom to my in-person courses. As students walk into class, I will have music playing, and I will project an art piece onto the board while we are on our 15-minute break. Many of the social work students I teach are either entering my class coming from field placements, their place of employment, or other volunteer work. I use music

to help them, and myself settle into the idea of beginning class. It provides everyone with an opportunity to relax and ground themselves before we embark on difficult discussions.

Furthermore, one of the best features on Zoom students appreciated was the ability to rename themselves. Gender identity and pronouns make up much of the prevalent conversations on college campuses, whether it's someone's name or the gender pronouns a student identifies with. The rename feature on Zoom provided what I believe to be an outlet to provide students and instructors with easily accessible tools to prevent the likelihood of misgendering or misidentifying someone. This does not mean that mistakes did not happen; however, with functions on Zoom such as the chat, students could direct message each other and correct one another when an error was made, which was not often. My courses also typically have a collective class agreement where we have free range to hold each other accountable for mistakes we may have made. Once made aware of the error, the person would correct themselves, and we would move on. It has been challenging to think about how I would translate this into the classroom. However, it is of the utmost importance to do so. The first thought that came to mind is using name cards but instead having students place their gender pronouns on them. The second idea is that I usually have students the first few weeks of class say their names whenever they speak, so we get to know one another. I will continue this practice but also have students state their names and their pronouns.

Finally, allowing students to process readings and course materials without my presence created a highly engaging atmosphere. Students in my online class were each responsible for signing up for days to summarize the main points of required readings and critique their strengths and weaknesses. Students were also responsible for providing two to three discussion questions. After student presentations, I would place them into small breakout rooms of 5 students. They would discuss the readings further, using breakout questions as a guide and engaging with any other piece of the material they believed was relevant. By the time we returned as a collective group, conversations were always more robust after providing students with time to debrief amongst themselves. This is the most challenging aspect of online teaching to mimic. It's unlikely to be able to create a private space for students to debrief; however, allowing for in-class small group sessions may create similar results. I am considering allowing students to leave the classroom in small groups and meet in other parts of the building or right outside to mimic the private space they would have during a zoom breakout room.

The rapid move to online teaching came with many challenges. It pushed me to adapt my typical approach to teaching and engaging my students. However, through it all, there were many lessons learned. I was able to develop new skills as an instructor and add valuable tools to help engage students in the learning process and create a more inclusive environment by respecting and affirming how individuals choose to identify. These lessons, I believe, will make me a more robust instructor in the long run, especially now having the ability to adapt to new environments of learning and develop creative ways to leverage technology.