"Learning alone-a with Corona": two challenges and four principles of tertiary teaching

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Abstract

Purpose – The author offers two challenges and four principles to teaching in the tertiary sector during this pandemic. While others may focus on the challenge of technical delivery, the author notes the challenges of systemic student disengagement. The author attempts to correct for this in four ways. She argues that the challenges she identifies and the principles that can be deployed in response are applicable across a range of teaching contexts and can be adapted for a post-COVID-19 era.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on the author's phenomenological experience teaching in the context of COVID-19 and draws as well on the sociological literature of higher education teaching.

Findings – Four principles emerged from a year of successful teaching during COVID-19. First, the author embraces a pedagogy of care, which reflects a genuine concern for student well-being. Second, the author utilizes a variety of technological approaches to keep students engaged. Third, she retains a flexible approach to teaching. Fourth, she considers carefully the extent to which COVID-19 is included, and excluded, from topical discussions. On this point she argues that COVID-19 should neither be the center point of any material, nor should it be ignored completely.

Originality/value – Shocks to the tertiary education system will continue to recur, as will instances of systemic student disengagement. Effective correctives to such disengagement, drawn from both education theory and empirical experience, will continue to be of value.

Keywords Tertiary education, Pandemic teaching, Pedagogy of care, Teaching human rights

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One need not read academic literature to know that the tertiary sector has been hit hard by COVID-19. University budgets have been constricted, with a pause on overseas student fee revenue impacting the projections for universities over the next few years (Ferguson and Love, 2020). Such restrictions have similarly impacted how universities view themselves, forcing a remodeling and impending identity crisis for those that rely on revenue from full fee-paying international students (Marshman and Larkins, 2020). Despite the operational challenges facing universities during the pandemic, central to the higher education challenge at this moment is tertiary teaching and the impact the virus has had on its engagement/delivery. While others may focus on the challenge of technical delivery, I note the challenges of engaging students.

In this essay I outline two key challenges related to systemic student disengagement in the context of COVID-19. I rely on my own phenomenological experience teaching a postgraduate human rights course and contributing to teaching into an introductory sociology course at an

Australian university to demonstrate the social challenges for students. Then I offer four principles to help overcome those challenges. Through reflections on my own experiences, feedback from students and reference to broader literatures, I argue that the challenges I identify and the principles that can be deployed in response are applicable across a range of teaching contexts and can certainly be adapted for a post-COVID-19 era.

Two key challenges

COVID-19 presents specific, but not insurmountable challenges to teaching well in the tertiary sector. Many of these have already been detailed elsewhere, such as the challenges of preparing online lectures quickly (Lee, 2020) and concerns about technology access (Juhary, 2020). These concerns had already been flagged prior to COVID-19's emergence, such as questioning how to deploy online material and encourage peer interaction in ways that mitigate student anxiety (Gillett-Swan, 2017). To these, I add the challenge of systemic student disengagement, which manifests in two ways. First, the pandemic has the ability to weaken social structures, both broader ones at the family and community levels and individual ones. Second, the unique place-based aspects of university life suggest that the pandemic's potential to disrupt tertiary physical contexts is high. The result of social and physical disruptions, I argue further, can be student disengagement.

Challenge #1

First, while COVID-19 has affected students of different socioeconomic classes and family contexts differently, it is abundantly clear that there are profound, as-yet understudied impacts on families and communities (Smyth *et al.*, 2020), from loss of jobs (Noble *et al.*, 2020) to feelings of isolation to existential trauma (Saltzman *et al.*, 2020). In the case of Australia, and in other parts of the globe, the impacts of lockdown measures in the wake of COVID-19 for families and communities are visible and far-reaching. The rise in domestic violence has been a concerning outcome of such measures, as well as a sharp rise in alcohol consumption and economic disadvantage for families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Smyth *et al.*, 2020). The impacts of such stresses ripple out of the family unit to education, with vulnerable students of all ages at risk of long-term implications on their studies, including disengagement and increased levels of anxiety and isolation due to restrictions. This reality is compounded by concerning statistics around job losses, with unemployment rising from 5.2 to 11.7% between March and April in Australia alone (Noble *et al.*, 2020). As the impacts of COVID-19 begin to affect students and teachers alike, the future impacts that isolation has had on mental health of populations around the world are yet to be seen (Saltzman *et al.*, 2020), particularly in relation to long-term prospects of students and employment opportunities following tertiary studies.

Given the social, economic and emotional strain of COVID-19 to families and communities, students' focus on things other than their studies is understandable. This deprioritization of classwork may stem from various sources. It has been found that students who undertake studies/coursework in emergency contexts may deprioritize their studies due to the enormity of challenges facing them outside the classroom. These contexts are not limited to health pandemics, with displacement, environmental disasters and war often at the forefront of such disruptions to education (Creed and Morpeth, 2014).

In the context of COVID-19, a recent study on the impact of emergency remote teaching at the University of British Columbia showed that 69% of students surveyed believed that their interest and engagement with course material were negatively impacted by this method of delivery. A drop in communication between teachers and students was a key part of such disengagement, with the loss of regular and direct interaction and communication the

most common issue with students adapting to the transition (Petillion and McNeil, 2020). Further, in this very moment, the urgency of COVID-19 may falsely suggest to students that certain disciplines such as public health or medicine are more valuable than other subjects. On the other hand, the careers that these subjects lead to may be seen as increasingly dangerous or emotionally herculean to undertake (Savage *et al.*, 2020).

Challenge #2
Second, the physical environment of the university looks very different in the context of COVID-19, primarily because students are physically dispersed. Their extracurricular life, previously deeply social, has been hindered. Attendance in class (even on Zoom) has been compromised. And the composition of campuses has altered, because the physical student body has changed dramatically. The political economy of higher education has for years moved in the direction of an "edubusiness," creating a channel between universities desiring more bodies to pay tuition and overseas students who can pay for it (Luke, 2010). This political economy has led to significant student migration across the globe. In Australia, for example, the edubusiness model has created a massive market for students from Asia, who in 2018 comprised 27% of the total Australian university student population and 86% of all overseas students [1]. Elsewhere, in the USA, for example, the total number of international students as of 2018 was 987,314. Globally, the number of students studying abroad for the same year stood at 3,935,834 [2].

COVID-19 has, of course, wreaked havoc on campuses with significant tertiary student migration. Some students were never able to physically travel to their university. Some were compelled to return home. And some were compelled to remain in their place of study indefinitely. Many teachers face challenges engaging students when they are experiencing a stark disconnect between the expectations of studying in a new locale and the reality of this pandemic. Dormitories have strict policies that belie what many consider to be the college experience (Fazio, 2020). In any of these instances, what we might call the "inflexibility of mobility" has the potential to exacerbate feelings of disconnection for students, as physical distancing from family goes hand in hand with social distancing.

In an academic setting, such restrictions have been harmful to student and teacher experiences on and off campus. Recent studies have captured the impact that social distancing has had on mental health, particularly as altered routines have impacted the purpose of students, affecting their livelihoods and ability to cope with change (Venkatesh and Ediappuli, 2020). In a similar vein, the term "social distancing" has been recommended to be replaced with "physical distancing" by psychiatrists, as the very notion of "social distancing" may trigger negative emotions for those with existing mental health conditions (Wasserman *et al.*, 2020). Whichever way it is articulated, the experience of social distancing is just as loaded as the term, impacting both students and teachers as they continue to attempt to deliver the best possible outcomes of an education system designed for a very different context than the one experienced in the current climate.

In sum, student disengagement in the classroom brought on by COVID-19 emerges from both social and physical contexts and may be compounded by a lack of social connection. How might we correct for the challenges that students face, when they are, as I noted in one moment during the semester where I attempted a dark-ish rhyme to uplift the students, "learning alone-a with Corona"?

The responsiveness of phenomenology
Teachers who are responsive to their students' struggles naturally rely on their experiences of teaching to inform better practice going forward. I argue, then, that phenomenological

approaches lend themselves well to the development of inductive teaching principles. I utilize one such approach in this paper, doing the iterative work of moving between teaching theories and reflections on what makes for positive student outcomes in my own teaching experience, measuring such outcomes through student attendance, qualitative evaluations and reflections on final work.

In a model like this, phenomenology's responsiveness to data mirrors teachers' responsiveness in the classroom. It means that the practice of evaluating teaching mimics the practice of teaching. For this author, this symmetry also reflects a belief about the importance of engaging students so that they have a sense of their place in the world (Anderson *et al.*, 2021, under review). Such evaluations, which are concerned with our intersubjective roles as researchers and (teaching) practitioners, mirror other phenomenological work that does the same in other research contexts (e.g. Chen 2017).

Four principles to respond to systemic student disengagement

The principles developed further emerged from a successful year of teaching in the context of COVID-19. While I draw on practices I undertook in both the sociology undergraduate and human rights postgraduate contexts, my measures of success were only available in the postgraduate context, because in the undergraduate course into which I taught, it was not possible for me to disaggregate my teaching practice from that of other teachers. My postgraduate human rights course of 17 students showed high indicators for success in the context of COVID-19. This included a high attendance rate (more than 95%) for each week, even considering that the course was conducted through a 3-h seminar on Zoom. This rate matched and even exceeded prior years. As described further, students had their cameras on for the entirety of the 3 h, so this percentage reflects real attendance. In addition, my teaching evaluations, both quantitatively and qualitatively, matched and/or exceeded previous years. Students' satisfaction with the overall teaching quality of the course in 2020 averaged 4.94 out of a total score of 5, with 100% of students responding. This same question yielded an average of 4.73 satisfaction in 2019 and 4.80 in 2017.

Qualitatively, comments from teaching evaluations were nearly unanimously positive in 2020, with 100% responding. Characteristic of the few comments regarding how the class could be improved was: "Face to face learning would have definitely made this better. but it did not fall short nonetheless." Another noted: "I don't think anything needs 'improvement'. [Our teacher] did a wonderful job of transferring this course online amid COVID-19. She maintained her passion and integrity to the course and ensured the topics we were reading and studying were relevant and engaging."

One student noted the difference between the teaching in this unit and others during COVID-19; "[Our teacher] makes effort to make class engaging, fun, and intellectually stimulating and it truly shows in her lectures and activities. Whereas most of my units of study this semester have been very disappointing, not only due to the move to the online space, but also due to the lack of awareness from lecturers, this unit of study has exceeded my expectations. Required hard work, but it was truly all worth it." I include this final sentence as a way of emphasizing that students did not appreciate this course because they were given a "COVID pass" and not expected to work hard. To the contrary, the unit required a great deal of intellectual and temporal work.

The following comment, which one student submitted through a University Commendation system, reflected the ways that students were aware of the impacts that COVID-19 had wrought and my efforts to offer a corrective. Students' face-to-face comments to me (recorded through my personal reflections) and in emails offered similar sentiments:

> This was an extremely disruptive semester and [our teacher] was open, supportive, approachable and committed to us doing our best to learn. . . .The whole structure of the unit had to change

dramatically last minute. [Our teacher] did an amazing job of reassuring us while she adapted the course to make it interactive online. Her sense of humour, vivaciousness and dedication to students made this unit one of the most enjoyable I've ever done by far.

I credit the four principles I describe further with the positive experience of my students.

Principle 1: pedagogy of care
First, as my weak attempt to rhyme my way into students' hearts demonstrates, I suggest that uplifting students is an important component of teaching. This is a pedagogy of care, and it suggests that a concern for students is a priority for the teacher, not an inconsistent by-product that may or may not emerge when interacting with students (Noddings, 2005). The *performance* of that care is an element of this pedagogy. On our first Zoom class, I carved time out of the lecture to check in and ask how students were doing. Students could respond either by speaking or in the chat function. I shared some of my own difficulties to get us started. Several students – from urban areas, rural towns and overseas – shared the difficulties their families were facing. Students noticed and appreciated this simple small act of caring and thanked me after class. To my surprise, several noted that I was the first teacher to ask about their home lives. Although the data have for years revealed the value of expressing care for our students, particularly in relation to the importance of establishing trust between the teacher and the student (Curzon-Hobson, 2002), such practice has not become an embedded behavior for many higher education instructors. There are many factors that contribute to this reality, with the increased commodification of universities and the resultant performance pressures of academics at the forefront of this decline (Blackmore, 2009).

The difficulty of connecting with, and performing acts of care, is difficult in an online environment, as technology and requests for assistance can distract the students and drain the teacher (Rose and Adams, 2014). To mitigate the distance effects of online learning, I cultivated different strategies for asynchronous learning (the classroom material is posted and students can view it at their convenience) and synchronous learning (the classroom material is delivered "live" and students interact with the instructor in real time). For the former, in one unit my first video began with an acknowledgment of the difficulties of the current situation and allowed students a (small) window into the chaos that COVID-19 had wreaked in my life, from an overly messy corner of my work space to the inclusion of my six-year-old's lament that his ten-year-old sister's repetition of the words "peace and harmony" was really anything but peaceful. I considered editing out of the recording this 10-min interlude of my negotiations with my children, but in the end, I opted to leave it in, with a note that advised students of the time stamp so they could skip it. A student panel from one university's postsemester symposium, "Teaching well and supporting students during COVID-19," confirmed that students appreciate the chance to see the personal side of their lecturers, tutors and professors [3]. This is, of course, not unique to teachers of higher education. The human need to see leaders, celebrities and media personalities as fallible human beings has led to a rash of viral videos with children crashing the interview, as was seen through the now infamous BBC News Interview in 2017 [4], or leaders such as New Zealand's Prime Minster Jacinda Ardern reaching out to a nation in lockdown while still in a tracksuit after putting her daughter to bed (Roy, 2020).

For synchronous learning, I requested that students keep their video recording on, if possible, and I explained why: I cared about their engagement, and by scrolling through their faces I had a sense if my instruction was motivating and interesting. The step of being transparent about why I requested that students keep their video on is an important component of doing so. If students feel they are being asked to keep their video on simply to be monitored, any connection one hopes to create will be severed by a lack of trust. I kept my own video on, and moved my line of vision between looking at the student's faces and staring

directly into the camera to simulate eye contact, all the while acknowledging how awkward that felt. In one class I asked students to write into the chat box the types of activities that seemed to uplift their spirits and also those activities that had been recommended to them to calm their anxieties but that they themselves hated. A light-hearted debate about the merits and frustrations of yoga broke out among students, as did a good set of recommendations for guilty podcast listening. Small efforts like this took less than 5 min of class time and created the beginnings of a sense of support and community in the virtual classroom.

In both contexts, I used light humor to create a bit of cheer on dark and stressful days. Bakar and Kumar (2019) speak to the power of humor in higher education settings, not just in times of crisis, noting that humor can dissipate the feeling of hierarchy between the lecturer and the student, allowing for greater freedom in discussions and a way of engaging students and capturing their attention. For example, I shared with all my students my go-to video to lift my own mood: a parody on "Ice Ice Baby" called "Corona Virus, Baby." If the vision of their teacher trying to move in time to Vanilla Ice was not enough to offer a moment of levity, perhaps the clever lyrics were: "Will it ever stop, yo? I hope so. Stock up on pasta, and bog roll [5]".

Principle 2: varying the form

Second, it is recognized in teaching practice that varying the form of delivery helps students to remain engaged (Moskal *et al.*, 2013). While COVID-19 severely limited some of those forms – no more field trips, no in-person guest lecturers, no face-to-face debates – other forms of varied delivery are possible. In an asynchronous class, I included in my lecture a "guest lecturer" – a 10-min Zoom conversation I had with a colleague about diasporas and transnationalism. We debated the definitions and relevance of these two concepts and reflected on what these ideas meant to us, with personal references made to engage students directly. In a synchronous class, I used chat rooms to assign creative tasks to enrich discussion, with small exercises such as analyzing a piece of text to locate certain aspects of the argument. In both contexts, I used the online blackboard to provide some variety in the visuals viewed by students, showing how I might map a certain set of relationships. Because my drawing skills are limited, self-deprecation was a necessary part of that effort.

Online polls offer another varied means to capture student interest, with short questions that try to link student experiences with what they are learning. A question such as "Were either of your parents born in another country?" is a gateway to having students think about migration. This can be posed in real time, or it can be posed as part of an online survey in an asynchronous class, and the results discussed the following week. Such polls, of course, mimic a much older teaching technique that precedes online technology. Asking students to raise their hands or otherwise participate in active learning is nothing new (Ebert-May *et al.*, 1997). In the context of COVID-19, a variety of online instruments permit fast and accurate poll-taking and compiling of results.

Principle 3: flexibility in delivery and reception

Third, teachers and students benefit from a flexible teaching and learning environment. This is difficult in the contemporary context, where both teachers and students are increasingly surveilled, monitored, KPI-ed and rubricked (Kairuz *et al.*, 2016). Teachers must adhere to the material, learning outcomes and modes of delivery promised in university documents. Students are marked against formulaic criteria (Grainger and Weir, 2020) and heavily penalized for missing deadlines unless they go through lengthy and burdensome special consideration processes (Zimmerman *et al.*, 2015). But COVID-19 proved that flexibility is possible. Many institutions in 2020 gave teachers permission to vary student assessments,

and students were given unusual leeway to submit work late. While not traditionally understood in these terms, I argue that this flexibility serves as a way to express concern for students: *we know that you are going through a difficult and stressful time, and we do not want to compound that.*

A flexible approach to teaching also permitted me to capitalize on a range of online resources that have sprung up in the context of COVID-19. Virtual museum tours offer students a way to view historical moments through objects. The Sydney Southeast Asia Centre (SSEAC), a multidisciplinary center at the University of Sydney, hosted their annual "Politics in Action [6]" conference on Zoom, and this offered students an engaging way to learn about the region. Rather than eschewing popular material or feeling guilty about not reproducing interesting content that already is out there, flexibility permits instructors to encourage students to engage freely with (nonacademic) material in creative ways. Bridgland and Blanchard (2001) speak to the importance of such an approach, not only for developing skills in creative thought, but also so that students can be engaged in ways that are reflective of their environments, values and styles of learning.

Principle 4: don't make COVID-19 the elephant in the room, but don't make it the room, either

Fourth, this incredibly disturbing pandemic should neither be ignored entirely nor made the entire focus of any class. It is tempting for teachers to stick to their old teaching notes, especially when new technologies make delivery more difficult. But it is impossible to ignore the impact that COVID-19 has had on teachers' and students' lives, and even a short exploration of this in the classroom heightens the relevance of whatever is being taught. In the context of my fields – sociology and human rights – the connections are straightforward and easy to draw. I was able to point students to, for example, news articles about garment factories closing in Myanmar (Oh, 2020) and podcasts about China's relationship with Southeast Asia during COVID-19 (Pearson, 2020). While the social sciences and medicine may appear at first glance to have the most relevant material for application to COVID-19, an invested teacher can make connections to a global pandemic to any subject at all, from architecture (how will homes be designed in the future to mitigate the risks of pandemics) to agriculture (safe farming practices) to mathematics (analysis of COVID data).

At the same time, students need a break from thinking about COVID-19. There is, after all, another world out there, post-pandemic and even during it. Therefore, material about COVID-19 should be selected carefully and integrated with consideration. Not every relevant news item needs to be shared, and not every discussion must contain reference to it.

Conclusion

Whether another pandemic will descend on our planet very soon or will give us some breathing room to adjust, it is certain that shocks to the tertiary education system will continue, including health-related, financial or environmental. In addition to the technical challenges of teaching during COVID-19, this paper has focused on the social challenges for students, with ramifications for delivery modes and substance. The challenges that I have discussed in this chapter – both focused on the risks of student disengagement – will likely be relevant for any future shocks.

Likewise, the four principles I have suggested to overcome these risks are not specific to COVID-19, but can be extrapolated to future shocks. Embracing a pedagogy of care, deploying a variety of delivery techniques, remaining flexible and thinking carefully about the inclusion of relevant current events (shocks or not) will help with the learning of course material as well as advancing student well-being. For teachers who care about their students,

the rewards for doing so go far beyond a positive teaching evaluation or acknowledgment by university higher-ups. Engaging students in meaningful and enjoyable ways allows us to communicate that in our campus lives, and elsewhere, we are not alone.

Notes

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