

A Professor's Pandemic Response

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As educators we've each had our own unique responses to the pandemic and the challenges it has brought to teaching, student-teacher relationships and our own mental well-being. Here I relate my personal experiences proceeding through the summer and early fall of 2020 – I want others in our community to know that you're not alone if you're worried or experiencing anxiety.

Early Summer

- Yikes; this world barely resembles the one I've known my whole life. At least I have time to plan how I'm going to teach this fall. I don't know whether I'll be teaching in person or not, though, so planning is difficult.
- I just realized: when the university announced during Spring Break that the rest of the spring semester would be delivered online, they also cancelled graduation ceremonies... in the flurry of making adjustments to finish the semester, I never got to say goodbye to the graduating seniors and wish them well.

Late Summer

- I get so many emails about resources and strategies to try for synchronous / asynchronous / hybrid courses. Zoom, TopHat, Socrative, Piazza – the list goes on. I want to do the best for my students, but I can't even keep up with reading all the emails. Why does everyone seem to be dealing with this better than me?
- I can't believe fall classes are two weeks away!
- My wife and I had to put our beloved dog T-Bone to sleep; he was my first pup. I grieve as I perform necessary preparation for classes, and from time to time take a moment to check on my feelings and emotions. I know the loss of a wonderful pet is probably a small concern considering everything that's going on, but it still hurts. I do my best to maintain focus when needed, though it doesn't always work.

Early Fall

- First day of classes. I dress in my favorite business-casual outfit and choose a mask that seems to accessorize well enough. I find I'm unsettled by all the students in my classroom wearing masks - it's eerie. It reminds me of a recent walk in the park where I saw signs espousing the reasonableness of physical distancing, and thought for a moment about how those signs would look to survivors – you know, if this is what the start of an apocalypse feels like.
- With all my students wearing masks I can't see their faces, let alone match faces to names. I'm also used to "reading" the class to see whether the material is making sense or if any of my dry jokes are landing. I'm physically distanced from my students, but I feel figuratively distanced from them as well. I hadn't anticipated that.
- One of my students emails to ask why I'm only providing the hybrid in-person / asynchronous routes that my university has specified and not adding a bonus synchronous class option too. I type an emotional response about how I'm already feeling overwhelmed, I'm working with the constraints I was provided by the university, I have concerns about the limits of my attention already, let alone with the "voice of the chat" to deal with... I delete the email before I send it, and come up with a shorter response.
- After eight days of classes, the university sends an email to everyone about a third COVID-19 cluster involving our students. I get up and pace around my house anxiously for a moment, but then quickly sit back down – I've got my in-person 50-student hybrid class tomorrow and I still have to prepare.
- This morning when I taught my hybrid course, only 6/50 students showed up. In the afternoon I receive a message stating the university is moving to online-only instruction for all undergraduate courses. I happen to be holding office hours over Zoom, and a student immediately joins to ask what my plans are for the rest of the semester. I'm not sure how long I sat silently before I responded.
- I picked some of the heirloom tomatoes I grew from my grandmother's seeds today, and they're beautiful. We have plans to use them in a rustic cornbread salad for dinner tonight. It's nice to have something to look forward to. □