COMMENTARY

Let's Add Compassion to Our Online Curriculum

By Karen J. Head | MARCH 31, 2020

✔ PREMIUM

As the coronavirus crisis escalates, faculty members across the country are rushing to retool their courses online. Given the emotional and psychological toll of the changes brought on by the pandemic, integrating empathy and compassion into our courses is now a critical part of the work we must do.

Many of us, but definitely most traditional-age college students, are about to face losses unlike any we have ever encountered. Whether that is the loss of life of people close to us, the loss of our own good health, the loss of income, the loss of opportunity, or the loss of security in ways large and small, all of us will be changed by Covid-19.

Joyce Hesselberth for The Chronicle

The accompanying sense of insecurity should be a focus of course redevelopment as we move to remote delivery, because we need first to focus on the human part of this experience. Students may not have access. They may be distracted by sick relatives. They may be forced to work to help their families financially. They may have to look after younger siblings. They may not have a safe place to live off campus. They may be ill themselves.

As the virus spreads, faculty members have been discussing how to build accountability into their courses, and this concerns me because that should not be our first priority. Long ago, as a new graduate student, I opted to participate in a teaching mentoring program. In an early workshop about designing courses, I made a rookie observation based on what I thought mattered most. In a nutshell, I worried about not letting students "get away with anything" and making sure I was being rigorous enough. I was too naïve to understand that being rigorous is not synonymous with making sure students are not cheating. What my mentor said to me came to define my pedagogical strategies: "You don't have to build a trapdoor for your students to fall through. It's your job to point out there's a hole in the floor."

If evaluating your students is your starting point in this new process, please reframe your teaching approach. You absolutely should be thinking about continuing to meet learning objectives. However, you should also be thinking about the new challenges your students are facing. Their biggest obstacle is likely to be access, so creating a variety of pathways for completing assignments is crucial. Again, students' lives have been upended, and they are struggling to deal with all these changes. Access isn't just a question of getting online, and students' distraction or lack of interaction does not necessarily mean they are trying to game the situation. Make it a new habit to assume good intentions.

Once we have considered the emotional elements of this crisis, faculty members have many practical issues to negotiate. Generally speaking, I think we have expectations of what we hope students will learn. But even in face-to-face courses, we do not always consider whether changes in our course design could work better for students.

Instructors who have been trained to regularly reflect on and revise their teaching methods are probably having an easier time pivoting online. Even so, courses that were not originally designed for online delivery cannot seamlessly move into that space.

That was a lesson I learned in 2012, when I taught one of the first massive open online courses in composition. That MOOC adventure forced me to navigate the challenges of teaching first-year writing, with qualitative feedback, to 22,000 students on six continents. In the same way that MOOCs were unfairly seen at that time as representative of all distance education, it is now unfair to compare crisis-response remote delivery to well-designed distance education. I have spent the past few days telling my colleagues to stop trying to "replicate" their courses online, because that simply isn't possible.

We have to revise our teaching goals, assignments, and practices. We need to be prepared to fail in ways we have never imagined. Everyone will have to embrace flexibility — a lesson our team of 19 learned quickly when designing that MOOC. Despite months of careful planning, there were many problems we did not anticipate, and, more important, problems we could not solve. Individual instructors, too, will have unsolvable problems. Show yourselves some of the same kindness you offer your students. This will take some trial and error.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle'*s key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- The Professor Is In: Stranded on the Academic Job Market This Year?

- How Colleges That Serve More Part-Timers Ended Up With Less Coronavirus-Relief Aid

- Colleges Are Handing Out Billions in Coronavirus Stimulus Funding to Students. Can They Do It Fairly?
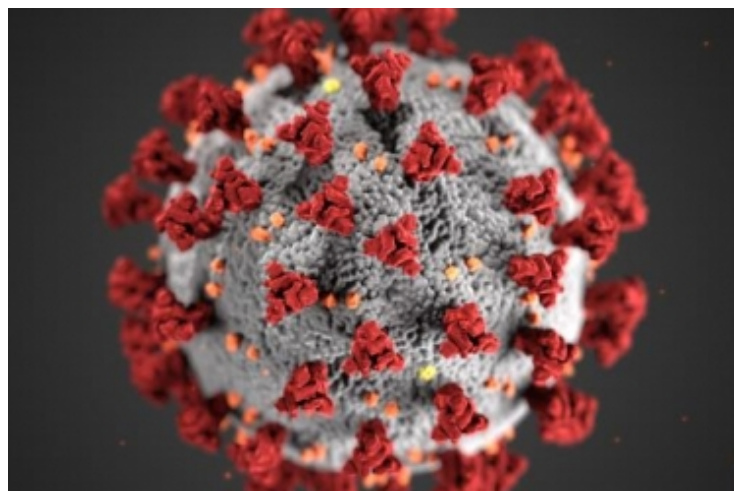
By definition, words like *distance* and *remote* are antonymous with *connection.* Restoring as much of a connection as possible, as soon as possible, is critical to the continuity of your course. Do what you can to replace face-to-face interactions with ones that emphasize our human relationships with students. While teaching the MOOC, I felt a deep sense of loss for the personal connections I would never have with these students. I had never stopped to consider how much I valued those connections, or how much they valued their own connections with me. That experience made me refocus on the human elements of my practice.

Some instructors will naturally be more comfortable interacting personally with their students, but each of us needs to approach reframing our courses in ways that acknowledge our shared humanity. Begin by asking how you can lower stress for everyone. Can you dispense with coursework that is really more about keeping students busy? Can you break complex concepts into smaller modules? Would daily updates be helpful, or would weekly digests be better? Do students need multiple ways to complete assignments? Can you be transparent about your own struggles so students trust that you're all in this together? Are you being clear about when and how students can interact with you now that you aren't on campus?

Sometimes the smallest gestures mean the most. It doesn't take much effort to send encouraging messages, for example. Because it's midterm, you and your students have already formed a community. What are some of the personal themes that have arisen? I once taught a creative-writing course in which frogs became a frequent reference point, so everyone began sharing funny frog photos and videos. Some might argue that such things had nothing to do with the course. However, this kind of bonding has everything to do with making people feel that they are part of something bigger. That makes them feel supported, which, in turn, helps them be more successful.

Faculty members are undoubtedly feeling overwhelmed by all this adaptation, because the work is neither quick nor easy. One thing I found remarkable while teaching the MOOC was how proactive students could be. For example, some students translated course materials into other languages, without being asked or rewarded. So consider this:

Can you allow students to offer suggestions about how the course might operate more effectively for everyone? I encourage you to try this. Again, it is a way to strengthen the sense of community.

Making education work for the next few months is going to involve many sacrifices, but you may also have some joyous and illuminating moments. If we all begin from a place of shared humanity, if we're careful to point out trapdoors to one another, we can continue to help our students keep learning — and learning is, after all, the goal we have always had.

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