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Pedagogical Practices for Teaching through Crisis

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When the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic started transforming the landscape of teaching in the U.S. in Spring 2020, I had already begun redesigning the content of my fully online summer course, which focused on global medievalisms in film and text, called "The Modern Middle Ages." The course begins by inviting students to evaluate their existing knowledge of the Middle Ages, then read their choice of several medieval/medievalism pairings and evaluate the differences against the background of some mainstream and academic readings about the stakes of medievalism. After that, students focused more wholly on contemporary works of medievalism on screen and in text, centered on two themes: gender and race. The syllabus included familiar works like *Game of Thrones* and *Lord of the Rings*, graphic novels like *Nimona* and *Malika, Warrior Queen*; and works by authors including Haruki Murakami, Naguib Mahfouz, Miguel Asturias, Julio Cortázar, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Sandra Cisneros. As the pandemic unfolded, my university, Florida International University (FIU), moved overnight from face-to-face to remote with no preparation beforehand. Witnessing the struggles of colleagues and students in those first months impressed upon me the need to think differently not just about the content, but also about the foundational principles of my own course design. I couldn't address all the issues that I observed that semester, or that have emerged since, but prioritizing elements of my course design by drawing on the scholarship of teaching and learning that addresses the need for trauma-informed pedagogies and bandwidth recovery proved so successful in the summer of 2020 that they have taken on roles in my course designs since.

In looking for guidance about how to conceptualize the redesign and what possibilities might suit the situation, several core principles emerged from this scholarship that shaped my redesign priorities and my sense of what might be possible to achieve. These principles centered around the need to practice radical hope, which "relies upon our faith that our current thinking and actions will create a better future—even without specifically understanding what that future will look like";[1] to reference the pandemic explicitly in my syllabus and course design in order to acknowledge students' "struggles, pains and griefs—and in doing so, we validate and empower them to heal";[2] and to prioritize

[1] Kevin M. Gannon, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), 4-5.
[2] Mays Imad, "Pedagogy of Healing: Bearing Witness to Trauma and Resilience," *Inside Higher Education,* July 3, 2021, accessed September 29, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2021/07/08/how-faculty-can-support-college-students%E2%80%99-mental-health-fall-opinion.

flexibility in order to create a learning environment within which students could "reclaim some [. . .] cognitive resources so they can learn and make progress towards a positive future."[3] Directly and indirectly, these principles helped narrow the range of choices I felt that I had to make, while also providing goals that I could aspire to achieve in the redesign.

Applying these principles to a course could lead to a complete redesign from the ground up, but I only had a few weeks from the time my university went remote to the time I needed to finalize my summer materials, so I decided to concentrate my initial redesign around three conditions: 1) student isolation from social communities; 2) the unpredictability of personal circumstances (personal or family unemployment; unplanned child or sibling care; illness; mental health); and 3) anxiety and insecurity arising from health, employment, financial, family, housing, and social factors. These conditions reflected my assessment of the students at my university, FIU, and their specific needs; in other words, another principle—unacknowledged by me at the time but fundamentally relevant to my redesign—was to root my decisions in knowledge of FIU's student population and my prior knowledge of the experiences that complicated students' academic efforts. FIU is the fourth-largest public university in the U.S., an R1 HSI with more than 48,000 undergraduate students and 10,000 graduates.[4] As these designations and the number of Latinx authors described above as included on my syllabus might suggest, 67.3% of FIU students identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 12.5% as Black or African-American, and 25% as first-generation college students. 50% of them receive Pell grants, and the university is notable for contributing to the upward social mobility of its students.[5] This information, and many of the conditions cited above, have remained relevant since my university resumed face-to-face operations, and have assumed permanent roles driving my course redesign decisions going forward, because the pandemic exacerbated conditions that existed before and that have continued to shape my students' lives in and out of the classroom.

To address these conditions, I decided to emphasize three elements in my redesign. First, I focused on increasing flexibility in due dates; in this way I could accommodate the unpredictability of schedules because of employment, family, health, childcare, and other issues. Second, I designed enhanced opportunities for communication and

[3] Cia Verschelden, *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization* (Sterling: Stylus, 2017), 1.

[4] R1 is the highest-ranking classification granted by the Carnegie Foundation, which indicates a U.S. doctoral-granting institution with high research activity. HSI, meaning "Hispanic-Serving Institution," designates U.S. colleges and universities where Hispanic students make up at least 25% of total enrollment, and at least 50% of all students are eligible for need-based federal financial aid like Pell grants; the designation is set by the U.S. Department of Education, and helps direct equity-oriented assistance to designated institutions.

[5] Data drawn from the FIU Analysis and Information Management's Fact Book and the Common Data Set, accessed September 29, 2021, https://aim.fiu.edu/data_reports.htm.

connectedness to help build community and compensate for social isolation. Even after my university resumed face-to-face teaching, the number of students pursuing their degrees fully online in the English major alone at my university increased by more than 70% (from 72 fully online majors in Spring 2020 to 150 in Fall 2021), emphasizing the ongoing value of this redesign element in future online and hybrid classes. Third, to relieve stress, I diminished the role of grading, replaced with a focus on learning and skills development. In this way, I sought to lessen the degree to which my class contributed to students' already-complex lives and anxieties.

Given these starting principles, the conditions I sought to address, and the elements I wanted to emphasize in my redesign, what did any of this look like in practice? To begin, I added a section to my syllabus titled, "Learning in a Time of Pandemic," where I drew on phrasing used by Mays Imad in her advice for trauma-informed teaching, and stated, "There is a lot going on in the world right now. If you are scared, this is normal: your fight-or-flight reaction is working. In designing this class, I have worked hard to address how we can learn with both pleasure and effectiveness. Some features this class offers includes," after which I listed new and revised elements of the class that I thought made it possible for students to enjoy positive learning experiences despite the conditions they might face.[6] This both drew students' attention to how I designed the course to accommodate the conditions they confronted, and emphasized that I cared about their learning experience and had faith that it could be a positive one.

To add greater flexibility to the course, I concentrated on three interventions. First, I provided all assignments with their regular due dates, but then kept the submission window open until the weekend that followed (for example, an assignment due Thursday could be submitted late through Sunday). Students would not be penalized for taking advantage of the extended submission window, nor did they have to ask permission to submit during that window. That it was a defined window enabled me to intervene in a timely way if students missed the submission altogether. In its impact, I experienced fewer assignments coming in late past the window. This change also had the welcome side-effect of diminishing the amount of time I had to spend adjusting due dates and being asked to accommodate exceptions that might also be accompanied by private information about the students' health, family situations, and more: I am often rendered uneasy by the way the power disparity between a professor and students may leave them feeling pressured to disclose sensitive personal information in order to gain an accommodation.

Second, again enhancing the flexibility of the course, I added "breather weeks," where students accomplished self-reflection assignments, but had no additional reading or

[6] "Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning," posted by Mays Imad, April 13, 2020 (video), accessed September 29, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqcTbipuFDQ&t=37s&ab_channel=MaysImad.

assignments to submit. I scheduled these around weeks 5, 10, and 15 in a 16-week course. The self-assessments kept students learning by creating space to reflect on what they had learned and accomplished so far; in the context of COVID-19, it also provided a punctuating moment in which students could catch up on significantly missed work due to illness, or past which I would not accept late work (to prevent scenarios where, at the end of the semester, a student might propose to submit 16 weeks of work all at once).

Another element to add to the flexibility of the course drew on my previous experience designing token economies in my classes. I learned about token economies a few years ago when I moved into specifications-based grading.[7] Students might start with an arbitrary number of tokens, and/or earn tokens through behaviors that it might be desirable to incentivize—like making an appointment with a writing center tutor to revise an essay before submitting it, or attending an extracurricular event or lecture. Tokens can be exchanged to, for example, submit work late with no penalty, or skip an assignment. In a short summer semester, rather than adding in the complexity of the token system, I simply stated in the syllabus that students could exempt themselves from a maximum of two assignments, no questions asked. (In the learning management system, I asked them to submit a medieval cat meme in place of the assignment so that I knew what they were doing and could flag the LMS to excuse that student from that assignment.) I did exclude certain categories of assignments from what could be skipped to ensure that elements crucial to students' learning and progress would be addressed. In the case of my course, self-assessments were critical to students' progress, so I disallowed their excusal. Although students progressed well even after they skipped assignments, many of them acknowledged in the self-assessments that followed that they perceived the loss of what they skipped: that is, they recognized that the assignments were relevant and productive, not arbitrary or busy work, and they could feel an impact from what they didn't learn. They regretted the loss even while appreciating the ability to forge ahead in some fashion after encountering a speed bump in their lives.

A final element of flexibility designed into the course was to diminish the role of traditional, quantitative grading by centering qualitative feedback. Instead of assigning either points or letter grades to assignments, I simply provided the qualitative feedback: what I noticed about ways the students had done well, why this assignment was meaningful for the class or their studies, connections to future work, associations to issues the students had raised as important to them. Students had the option at any point to request a traditional grade;

[7] Linda B. Nilson, "Yes, Virginia, There's a Better Way to Grade," *Inside Higher Education*, January 19, 2016, accessed September 29, 2021, https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/01/19/new-ways-grade-more-effectively-essay. For more information about specifications grading, see also Linda Nilson's *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* (Sterling: Stylus, 2015).

some did, as a form of reassurance, but the majority focused on the feedback and responded to it positively and constructively in subsequent assignments. This form of grading, developed as "Ungrading" by Jesse Stommel, has been so successful and rewarding both for students and for me that I have since implemented it in classes at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.[8]

Another change made to the course design to provide a supportive community for students involved replacing traditional discussion forum posts with discussions hosted in small groups on a class Slack server. Slack is a communication application designed to facilitate team-based work. It allows for the exchange of files and images, and both participants and the host can create public and private groups for text-based discussion and file trading. Not only did it seem to offer a more positive alternative to WhatsApp, where student-led communities can sometimes turn toxic, Slack also offered a way students could reach out to me, more informally than by email, either in direct messages or in the general discussion or "office hours" chat rooms. (Alternatives to Slack with similar functionalities include Microsoft Teams, Discord, Line, and Voice Thread.) The informality and ease of accessing me via Slack led to it being the most frequently chosen method of communication with me. If I chose to enable smartphone or tablet notifications, I could also resolve matters when students and I were online at the same time, hastening the resolution of issues and diminishing the number of emails, messages, and the need to extend due dates or change other elements of the course design.

In order to facilitate discussions in an asynchronous environment, I gathered student preferences via a quiz and formed small groups for Slack discussions based on the time of day that students preferred to work on the course (morning, daytime, evening). In a later revision to the course, a more productive method centered around the time of week students preferred to work on the class (before due dates, on due dates, on weekends). Students could also ask to be reassigned to a different group if their preferences changed. Students who mentioned Slack in their evaluations and self-assessments consistently described using it as feeling more like authentic conversation than forum posts, said that—contrary to their expectations for an online class—they enjoyed the discussions. Some specifically mentioned that they enjoyed talking to each other. They referred to it as "a nice surprise," "an extremely useful tool," and something that "simulates the feeling of in-person discussion." Creating the opportunity for students to be present regularly on Slack most effectively facilitated the development of community in the online/remote environment.

[8] Jesse Stommel, "How to Ungrade," *Jesse Stommel* (blog), March 11, 2018, accessed September 29, 2021, www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/.

In addition, Slack played an enhanced role when, midway through the course, the protests about the murder of George Floyd increased awareness of racial disparities in the United States. My course in Summer 2020 traced an arc that concluded with a focus on how the whiteness of medievalism both reflects and contributes to racial tensions today. In that final module, students began with a brief introduction where I pointed to the whiteness of fantasy medievalism and then invited them to research the subject by selecting among readings I offered that included essays by Cord Whitaker, Geraldine Heng, Nicole Lopez-Jantzen, a video game designer, and the founders of the "Sword and Soul" fantasy genre. Particularly given this focus, it would not have been possible to be silent about Floyd's murder and the worldwide protests that followed. An announcement in Slack that addressed the subject, combined with some spontaneous revisions to reframe the content of the last module, gave space to address events as they unfolded, and students turned to Slack to acknowledge the protests, what the protests meant to themselves, and commented on how meaningful it was to have the topic given space in the class. This not only enhanced the sense of a class community, but also positively affected students' intrinsic motivation to succeed in the course.

These changes helped allow students to engage with the class more positively and productively despite everything happening in the world and their lives. In their final self-assessments and end-of-class evaluations, students mentioned that the ways the class provided flexibility enabled them to adjust to varying work schedules and the demands of other classes with inflexible due dates. One representative comment noted that these elements of the course design "alleviate[d] some of the tension," and another said that "I am excited to learn for learning's sake." The new methods used to enhance flexibility thus achieved multiple goals by accommodating real-life unpredictability and lowering students' stress as they tried to keep up with all their coursework. Indeed, student commitment to the class flourished, as did the quality of their work. Despite the pandemic, students displayed some of the highest-quality thinking I've seen in this course prior to these revisions, and I have implemented most of them in all the classes I've taught since: I see them becoming permanent aspects of my course design, and in some cases I've used and expanded on them already at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

Although my focus here has primarily centered on my attempts to improve student experiences in my course design, I would be remiss not to discuss their impact on me. Like many of us, the pandemic has contributed to the feeling of ongoing burnout and exhaustion. Breather weeks have provided welcome opportunities to catch up with the increased complexities of pandemic-era grading, as student illness has impacted the speed with which they try to recover when falling behind. Breather weeks have also opened space for me to take on the heightened emotional labor of seeing to students' welfare and checking in on underperforming students in a way that would have been

otherwise difficult or further exacerbated burnout. The increased flexibility around due dates has diminished the amount of time I spend administering the learning management system, and it has meant that I could spend time instead reaching out or providing better-quality feedback to students. The increase in my responsiveness to student needs enabled by Slack notifications diminished the backlog of email that previously accumulated over weekends. I have already mentioned more than once, even in the brief space of this essay, that several of my revisions have already taken space in subsequent courses, and they have also helped me improve and sustain my craft and efforts as a professor. Too often the discourse around teaching emphasizes benefits to students while seldom acknowledging impacts on faculty, particularly in an era on demanding increased and unrecompensed administrative labor, so I further want to conclude by acknowledging that what benefited my students also benefited me—and when I began looking for how to teach through crisis, I needed the help as much as did my students.