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COMMENTARY

Is This Still Triage? Or Are We Back to Teaching?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching over the past year, pushing many instructors and students into remote learning. These changes have forced new discussions about serious issues with the digital divide and an array of intersectional inequities, and they have prompted conversations about the physical and mental health of everyone involved. While initial transitions to remote learning were treated as distinct from previous in-person or online learning, increasingly we are seeing a push to "return to normal." This essay argues that pandemic recoveries take many forms, and risk and uncertainty must continue to shape our teaching. We must continue to engage with critical issues related to inequity, intersectionality, and broad discussions of health if we are to ensure a safe return.

Keywords: COVID-19; teaching; digital divide; remote learning

Triage

The Spring 2020 semester in the United States was bifurcated into "before COVID" and "after COVID" as universities pivoted to hybrid, remote, and online teaching on an emergency and ad hoc basis in response to the spread of the novel coronavirus. In March, my university, and others, moved into early and extended Spring Breaks, dismissing students while instructors scrambled to transition in-person classes to online spaces and to take rapidly thrown-together workshops on how to use often unfamiliar online programs.

When classes resumed, nothing was normal. Regular lesson plans had been replaced by efforts to reshape learning online. I discussed with colleagues and friends at other universities whether our now-virtual classrooms were spaces to let students discuss what was going on or spaces to avoid it. The answer, often, depended on the class, students, and instructors. My office hour conversations and emails were filled not only with questions about concepts or exams, but also with concerns about larger stressors and requests for deadline extensions as students found themselves navigating roles as essential workers, moving home suddenly, or struggling with illness – their own or that of loved ones.

I lost track of the number of times I heard, saw, or even said some variation of, "this isn't teaching, it's triage."

For many instructors, the next year blurred together in a space of academia triage as we responded to emergency conditions, shifted our priorities, and did our best to meet student needs. Here when I reference triage, I refer to how we spent more time assessing the situation than actually being able to do anything about it. Instructor confusion was in part due to this new-to-many-form of teaching and related training, which was interwoven with discussions about whether this was really traditional "online" teaching (the general consensus: no), what strategies worked best, and how to prepare more constructively for upcoming semesters as the pandemic continued. Uncertainty was common: which courses would be fully online, hybrid, or face-to-face? How would these decisions transform semester-to-semester? How would they vary instructor-to-instructor? How would they be shaped by university policies? By faculty unions? By local, state, and federal COVID-19 guidelines? How would changing vaccine access transform these situations?

Throughout the pandemic, and with growing attention focused on attempts to "return to normal," questions about risk and uncertainty intersect with existing and complex cultural, social, political, and economic histories of structural inequities. Not everyone can work from home. Not everyone can safely return to face-to-face classrooms. Not everyone has access to regular COVID-19 testing. Not everyone can take time off from work when sick. Not everyone has equal vaccine access.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to COVID-19 response or to pandemic recoveries in the classroom, as appealing as such an idea might be. However, there are general issues to consider, and we can build on research related to disaster response and recovery, pedagogy and learning, and universal design. In the rest of this essay, I describe how issues like the digital divide have affected students and the importance of accessibility in the discussion of a "return to normal." I introduce discussions tied to potential strategies for ensuring that students and instructors have options that work for the range of issues that will be ongoing in the coming semesters as we begin recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Digital Divide & Problems Faced

Among the uncertainties involved in moving to remote learning, instructors faced questions about how to present material in a way that was accessible and engaging for students. This included addressing problems related to the digital divide. While much of the work on the digital divide in relation to COVID-19 in the U.S. has been focused on K-12 education (e.g., Future Ready Schools et al. 2020; Lake and Makori 2020; Ong 2020; Stelitano et al. 2020), there are also real concerns at the college level (e.g., McLean 2020).

For students facing the digital divide, as Ong describes, "a lack of meaningful and full access to a computer or the internet translates into missed lessons, inability to access materials, and difficulties completing assignments" (2020, 07). It can also result in additional stress and confusion about larger themes in a class. These access issues did not begin with COVID-19, but as the pandemic pushed students and instructors out of physical classrooms, the shift to pandemic remote learning cast an even brighter spotlight on interrelated technology, pedagogy, and equity problems. Some students and instructors lack internet and technology access altogether, some have limited access and cannot improve its speed or quality, and still others may have access that does not meet their current needs, like multiple people simultaneously using the same network to access programs like Zoom. These needs also intersect with larger structural inequities (Future Ready Schools et al. 2020) and issues like home data caps with increasing costs and fees (Romm 2021), pointing to a broad range of concerns about affordability, access rights, infrastructure, and cultural and social issues.

Students who do have online access also faced challenges. Some students reported feeling like instructors assigned more work during the pandemic, possibly to make up for a lack of in-person assessment (Barre 2021). Others felt their privacy was invaded with online testing software. Students with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or temporary illnesses have reported that their needs are not met by the software, and they fear requests for accommodations may be judged (Harwell 2020; Patil and Bromwich 2020). Black, Latinx, Native American, Indigenous, Asian, and other non-white students have described literally not being recognized by the software (Caplan-Bricker 2021; Patil and Bromwich 2020). And students acting as caregivers described how actions like checking on people in their care or extra noise from children in the room are flags for the system even though such context is completely normal for students juggling their education and caregiving – the way so many instructors are, too (Patil and Bromwich 2020).

Flexibility & Accessibility

These seemingly diverse issues relate to one another and are tied to questions of accessibility in its many forms. They highlight the importance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a pedagogical framework that helps instructors meet a wide variety of students' needs, building accessibility in a variety of ways into the course design from the start rather than adding it in to meet specific students' needs only when those specific needs emerge, resulting in a more flexible and accessible product for everyone (e.g., Nave 2021; Sejdic 2021; Minkos and Gelbar 2020). Regardless of the specific form a class takes – in-person or virtual – this combination of COVID-19, accessibility issues, and pedagogical concerns points to the need for flexibility and choice wherever possible.

Flexibility and choice can take many forms, and options have been published in various journals and discussed in the media and on social media platforms by instructors looking for feedback from peers. For example, in the area of testing, options include

altering the format of the test to open-note/open-book or take-home exams (e.g., Jacobs 2021; Strauss 2020); altering assessment frequency and including a higher number of lower-stakes assignments; or altering assessment formats (e.g., Nguyen et al. 2020). Altering assessment formats can mean allowing students to complete assignments or even exams in multiple ways, such as allowing them to use entirely online resources like Canvas or Blackboard when possible, but also allowing for handwritten assignments to be photographed and submitted in order to reduce, albeit not eliminate, internet and technology access barriers. Moreover, while such alterations may prove useful in terms of accessibility as we begin to transition from pandemic to post-pandemic teaching (in whatever forms that takes), such options will also increase accessibility broadly for students in classes outside of a pandemic or post-pandemic context and may prove fruitful to education moving forward.

It is worth noting that each of these options comes with potential benefits and disadvantages for instructors and students, and some are better suited to particular courses, class sizes, or even topics within a class than others. Even outside of testing, many discussions are happening around issues like altering late work policies to allow for make-up assignment options, allowing for extensions in general, or around granting extension requests in specific contexts and time frames, discussions that sometimes echo pre-COVID conversations about similar issues (e.g., Moore 2018; Schisler 2019; Warner 2019; Flaherty 2020a; Pegoda 2021; Thierauf 2021). Some departments are keeping online asynchronous classes – or even adding new ones – that allow working students to take classes on their own schedules, alongside a combination of students making calls for more asynchronous, online, and hybrid classes, even when some students do find them difficult (e.g., Moore 2021; Shastri 2021; Suter 2021).

It is important to remember that the response to online accessibility concerns cannot and should not be to simply move everything offline and back to face-to-face interactions. Doing so raises other accessibility questions for students who are unable to return or to return safely to campus in-person instruction.

"Return to Normal"?

As universities increasingly plan to return to "normal" – or some version of it – we must ask what normal is and if it is good for everyone (Trivedi 2021). While more students are planning to return to on-campus housing, increasing numbers of classes are likely to resume face-to-face or hybrid instruction, and some student organizations and athletic events are being rescheduled or cautiously moved back into in-person spaces for Fall 2021 (e.g., Burke 2021a; Burke 2021b; Fernandez and Saul 2021; *Inside Higher Ed* 2021; NCAA 2021; Pattison 2021), this does not mean that *everyone* will be back face-to-face.

Vaccines have become increasingly available, but they are not universally available for everyone. The vaccination process has highlighted concerns about vaccine equity (e.g., Epstein et al. 2021; Jean-Jacques and Bauchner 2021; Johnson et al. 2021). The U.S.

vaccine rollout itself initially largely depended on internet access (e.g., O'Brien 2021), although, it is important to note, many people worked to share information in other ways, including through text messages, phone calls, and organizations like churches (e.g., Baillie 2021).

And despite the fact that hundreds of American colleges and universities are now requiring students to be vaccinated to return to classes this fall, this does not mean everyone on every campus will be vaccinated, as not all policies will be universal, exemptions exist, and not everyone has the same access (Callimachi 2021). Moreover, vaccinations do not mean that everyone will be able to return to campus (e.g., Burke 2021c; Durrani 2021). Students – or instructors – may find themselves facing additional complications due to travel restrictions or costs, concerns about traveling, or an inability to access an approved vaccine. They may choose to take advantage of the online courses that remain. Others may be unable to return to campuses due to medical concerns for themselves and others, as questions remain about how well vaccines work for people who are immunocompromised or who have specific medical conditions or chronic illnesses (Cha 2021).

Such examples point to the need to retain hybrid and remote access opportunities, even in the eager rush to return to face-to-face instruction. They also raise important points to consider outside of the context of the pandemic, reminding us all of the complexities students and instructors can face at any time. Building flexibility and allowances for complex life situations into courses will prove helpful as we move into pandemic recoveries. But in addition to this, they also build on the ideas of universal design for learning to promote accessibility for everyone. The key concepts of mitigation and preparedness may help us all be better prepared for future flexibility needs, potentially reducing the impact of – or at least helping us better prepare for – another Spring 2020-style triage. This flexibility and preparedness would help reduce the impact of a future need to pivot online on instructors and help us assist learners in making that transition more smoothly as well.

Varied Returns & Recoveries

The variation in returns to campus raises additional questions related to access, disaster response, and recovery. In my ongoing research, a clear pattern has emerged illustrating the importance of local voices and perspectives that result in a variety of needs and contexts for disaster response and recovery (e.g., Trivedi 2020a; Trivedi 2020b). That pattern holds true for the range of recoveries from COVID-19 (e.g., Faas et al. 2020; Trivedi 2021) and for the different contexts of campuses and their communities. It also echoes other points made here: there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

It is important to acknowledge here that not all of these decisions are entirely up to the instructors themselves. Instead, at many institutions, these decisions may be made or shaped by decisions from the administrative level which, in turn, may place a range of

parameters on what instructors feel they can or cannot do in their approaches to their classes, including, but not limited to: feeling pressure to resume face-to-face instruction, which has been an ongoing issue in the pandemic (e.g., Flaherty 2020b); preferencing face-to-face instruction over other forms of instruction (e.g., Kim 2021); and limitations related to the extent or implementation of vaccine and masking requirements (e.g., McDaniel 2021; Schackner 2021; Smith 2021). Alongside such issues, throughout the pandemic there have also been calls for ways to help instructors with the challenges they face, including suggestions like: creating stronger faculty communities; creating new policies and practices to help specific instructors including non-tenure track, part-time, and early career instructors; creating new partnerships outside of college and university systems; creating new systems of dialog between instructors and administrators; changing and delaying existing policies and reviews; recognizing new demands on instructors; and, of particular note, documenting what has happened during COVID-19 to ensure that these issues, problems, and potential solutions remain in institutional memory (Mickey et al. 2020; Baker 2020). While many of these issues were raised in the height of the pandemic, they should remain points of discussion and consideration for administrators and instructors alike during COVID-19 recoveries, which are ongoing, complex, and varied (Trivedi 2021).

Nevertheless, instructors themselves remain responsible for what happens in the classroom space itself – whether face-to-face, virtual, or a hybrid of the two – and are thus responsible for bridging the space between these administrative parameters and student needs. Such bridging will continue to be complex as COVID-19 and recoveries from it continue to shift and will absolutely necessitate instructors continuing to think about classroom spaces and courses with an eye towards flexibility and accessibility.

How instructors respond to accessibility issues will vary because their responses *need to vary*. Students' circumstances, cultures, COVID-19 impacts, and recoveries vary. Instructors' own recoveries will vary too, thus shaping what they can provide in the classroom – or if that classroom can be face-to-face or virtual. This is not a call to assume that campuses will not be affected by these issues, but rather a call to look carefully, to use our skills as anthropologists to observe our own cultures and contexts to see how our spaces and the people around us are affected.

At the start of every semester, I have students in each of my classes complete a short assignment to help me learn who they are, what brought them to my class, and what they know about the topics we will be discussing. It is a chance for students to introduce themselves to me and for me to take the temperature of the room. In many semesters, this assignment shows me how many students have never taken an anthropology class before or how many students are curious to learn about disasters. But in the era of COVID-19, it also allows me to gauge what students are uncertain about in taking a class in a particular format. The survey has been especially helpful for remote learning and for asynchronous classes, offering me a chance to see what my specific students and classes

need. This is also not something that works in every class, but it is a potential option for some.

Students and instructors alike continue to – as they always have – juggle much outside of the classroom. They have always had to do this, for life outside of the classroom has never stopped. But the combination of factors at work throughout the pandemic has put an ever-increasing amount of pressure on students and instructors and cast a new light on the ways in which teaching, learning, stress, and mental and emotional health intersect.

While we are clearly no longer in the immediate moments of "triage" that emerged so rapidly in Spring 2020, we are also clearly not in sustainable, well-established, and fully functional learning and teaching environments, even with a push to return to "normal." Risks and uncertainty must continue to shape our decision-making in the syllabus and in the classroom, whether that classroom is virtual, hybrid, socially distanced, and/or masked. Moving forward, we must be careful to ensure that our classrooms remain accessible for a wide range of students in a diverse set of circumstances and recoveries.

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