

Fostering Care and Community at a Distance

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Every day started with tea and the keyboard, chai and typing. A hello, a good morning, an encouraging line or paragraph. Discussion post after discussion post, my work as adjunct faculty in a fully online program usually began before breakfast or a shower. The students in my classes weren't all in my time zone, nor only in North America, and many worked late into the night after their kids had gone to bed, no matter where their sun set. So every morning, I woke to long trains of thought which had been typed somewhere by someone in the dark. And it was my job to let these students know they had been heard. It was my job to listen and respond, to prod and embolden, to cheer.

I did this for four years, seven days a week. Six courses in Fall, six in Spring, and four in the Summer. Usually between 150-200 students each term. My days circumscribed by hours in discussion forums.

The institution I worked for—Colorado Community Colleges Online—employed quality assurance-focused instructional technologists whose job it was, put simply, to check my work. Like a primary school maths teacher ticking off correct answers on student exams, the QA who monitored (and often roundly opined about) my work rated my performance by specific rubrics established for online teaching. One such rubric pointed to the number of student discussion posts I was required to respond to in any given discussion (I think it was 75%), and the number of daylight hours that could pass before I posted my responses.

I always brushed up hard against quality rubrics (I still do), if only because I've never been convinced that any set of standardized boxes for ticking could start, maintain, repair, or strengthen the relationship a teacher has with a student. Moreover, I found (and still do) that rubrics place too much emphasis on the seat of the teacher, situating them at the "front of the room" as it were. Even rubrics which claim to be student-centered, or even student-generated, rarely put the focus on the work of learning students bring to their educations, and in fact do something much worse. "Asking a student to replicate a process designed to control, oppress, or otherwise domesticate doesn't liberate them, it only hands them the tools by which that control and oppression are fashioned, without the power to transform anything at all" (Morris). Too often, rubrics are tools for measurement more than guidance, and they are more prescriptive than aspirational.

In truth, I felt my students might need to hear from me *more or less than*, rather than *exactly*, 75% of the time. Each morning with my tea in hand, unbreakfasted, and usually still in my pyjamas, I sorted through dozens of discussion posts—some answering the prompt, others answering each other, and those asking something more of me. As I sorted, I checked in with my teaching sense, that thing that Paulo Freire might call that "'something mysterious' that motivates teachers to persist in their work with love and determination" (Leopando 123).

Weaving my way down the thread of discussion was also a weaving my way through the relationships I'd established with each student. Did I know them well? Had they engaged deeply? Did they ask technical questions seeking high marks? Did they make deeper inquiry, delving past the material of the course to the act of learning itself? Could I sense in their words the need for a reply? Could I read within the exchanges between students a need for my interruption, interjection, or redirection?

Much as with any human conversation or relationship, I replied to the posts that my wisdom as a teacher—no matter how fallible—guided me to do. In most cases, more than 75%, but often (and decisively) a great deal less. I relied upon my own sense of connectedness rather than an administrative idea of quality.

The Fracturing of Connectedness in the Pivot to Online

This year, the precipitate shift to remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic—the so-called *pivot* which felt less like a left turn and more like careening off a bridge—came without any quality assurance measures behind it. Despite the efforts of instructional designers to corner the market on best practices, and the insinuation into the conversation by organizations like Quality Matters (a business predicated on overreaching and infantilising teachers), the move to online felt more bereft than productive, and threads of hope alone held together curricula and lesson plans.

Teachers found themselves separated from students so abruptly there were no good-byes or “we’ll work this out” or “this is what will happen next.” Guidance from school administration varied from institution to institution: keep up class schedules, move courses fully online, subscribe to the Quality Matters rubric, learn to use Zoom. Or all learning must be synchronous. Or all learning must be asynchronous. Lower the expectations for students for the rest of the term. Or keep everything business-as-usual. All with very little wondering at more organic hybrid approaches.

Meantime, millions of college students were told to move off campus immediately, leaving behind jobs, friendships, relationships. Hundreds of thousands of those students returned to homes where now they must care for elderly parents, find a new job, share computers with siblings; while others returned to homes where abusive parents or family members waited, where being an LGBTQ+ person was unacceptable, where learning would necessarily take a back seat to survival in an economic upheaval the likes of which neither their generation nor the two generations before them had experienced. Still other students had no home at all to return to.

When the pivot happened no one was prepared, and it showed—in the most forgivable, sympathetic, human way. In this circumstance of loss and confusion, quality assurance would not have helped. What best practices are there when the structures of education we all rely upon no longer protect our work?

Amid all the edtech hustling, and the well-intentioned if anachronistic advice from instructional and learning designers, one resonant note of guidance rose above the clamor: take care of each other. Take care of students. Take care of yourselves. Take care of learning. Be kind, be generous, be patient.

And if any best practices have emerged from the muddle, they have been revealed by trauma-informed pedagogy. A trauma-informed approach to teaching acknowledges the uncertainty and precarity of a student's position in relation to their education and learning. Trauma is not unique to times of pandemic—up to two-thirds of U.S. children have experienced at least one type of serious childhood trauma, such as abuse, neglect, natural disaster, or experiencing or witnessing violence (Minahan)—but in our time, trauma is more widely spread, and can be more readily assumed. Jessica Minihan writes that, “Traumatized students are especially prone to difficulty in self-regulation, negative thinking, being on high alert, difficulty trusting adults.”

A central component of trauma-informed practice, and one which has been both ready and thorny during the pandemic, is connectedness. According to Teaching Tolerance, “Connectedness refers to having relationships with others who can understand and support you. As we are practicing social distancing and have closed most public places, educators will need to get creative to help students feel connected.” Establishing a sense of connection in a time of isolation can not only keep students on track with their education, but it is also evidence of *care*. Taking care of students, taking care of ourselves, and even taking care of learning.

Connectedness, though, and the classroom community that follows from it, has flummoxed educators even in the best of circumstances. The perilous and seemingly insurmountable teacher-student divide and power dynamic, the front of the room lecture, the “banking model” that Paulo Freire refers to in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—these create a gulf between teacher and learner that's hard to bridge.

The sweeping proliferation of educational technology adds to this distance an array of digital platforms that exaggerate and exacerbate the divide: plagiarism detection tools, remote proctoring, behavior tracking through the learning management system or virtual learning environment, software that emphasize the primacy of the grade or mark. All of these put the instructor indelibly at the front of the classroom, and all communication becomes broadcast. The Zoom video conference platform has become the face of connectedness for many, but its use is fraught with complication, privacy violations, and accessibility issues. Its pedagogy, too, puts full control of the classroom in the hands of the teacher, and almost entirely out of reach of students. Alternatively, some teaching faculty have turned to social media to stay in touch with students, using Twitter or even Instagram to reach out. But under all of these choices is the fact that rather than connectedness, administrators and instructors (and those supporting their work) have focused on connectivity, worrying more about the technology they use than the human being they are trying to reach.

The Need for Care and Community

There's no built-in function in any technology which can produce community. Nor can building community be done from the front of the room; it is not an exercise or a manoeuvre. Rather than code safety, rather than prescribe it, we must demonstrate it; and once safety has been established, it must be honored. In that same way, connectedness is not a strategy as much as it is an intention, not a technology but a relationship, a promise.

Teaching Tolerance offers some clear practices that can help establish connectedness:

- Make time to ask students about something fun they are doing right now.
- Greet students by name and create a touch-free or virtual routine (similar to a handshake, a hug or a high five) to invite connection, either online or at meal pick-up.
- Consider putting students together in small groups to work on projects or activities and encouraging students to work together online or by phone.
- Incorporate space for play and fun activities into online lesson plans.

But these are only suggestions, borne out of a concern for students and a desire to help bridge that gulf between teacher and learner in a new digital environment where connectedness is mediated by a screen. And even these practices, which seem good and right and unassailable in times like now, require *attention* rather than simple adherence.

Thus, just as I did long ago with my tea and my keyboard—and just as many teachers have found themselves doing in the past few months—responding to students, building relationships of care, establishing or maintaining a sense of community have only a very emergent rubric. One with endless variants and no boxes to tick. Community is not simple nor orderly.

But it goes without saying that sustaining a classroom community is an essential act during a time of crisis. It is in crisis that we most immediately front with our human capacity to intervene, to grasp our agency—to be *learners*. When we are faced with feeling there is nothing we can do, we can ask: what has been done, what could have been done... which leads us to ask what can I do, and what will I do?

Which is to say: a discussion forum is never just a discussion forum, nor a Zoom-enabled class session just a videoconference. These are occasions for the development of community as part of the care we muster for students.

The role of the teacher is not just to listen, to extend care and compassion, but also to wait in the silence of grief and concern for the notes of humanization to emerge, and to amplify those notes so that a student can be reminded that they are, even in times like these, a being becoming, emerging. Even in this moment, even in pandemic and tragedy and fear, we are all nonetheless—and in some ways, more so than when comfort and peacefulness abide—in a process of becoming more human. As we are confronted by the aches and diseases of our culture, we can be reminded that *culture* is distinctly human, and so part of our common project.

As educators, it's not our work to *tell* learners these things, but to look in their eyes and respond to their words and *remember*. To speak from that knowledge and remembering. Not to lecture it

out, expecting learners to fasten to *becoming* as if it might have a rubric or in order to pass some muster, but to embody it and remember it and to speak to them from that place.

Sources

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