Empathy in Education After COVID-19

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Over the last two months, my partner and I have had many discussions about how Covid-19 has affected our relationship with our students. My partner teaches a generally underserved population of students at a CUNY school in the Bronx, Lehman College, whereas my students are mostly well-off undergraduates and graduate students at a small, religiously-affiliated institution. Nonetheless, the pandemic has taught us similar lessons about how we ought to be thinking about our students, and what they need from us and our institutions—not just during a time of crisis, but all of the time. What follows are the main lessons that I hope to carry forward from this challenging time. None of the insights I've had into my students are new to me, and they may not be to you either, but the pandemic has brought their importance home to me much more clearly.

Students face mental and physical health challenges.

Since we transitioned to online learning, students have let me know that they would have to miss class because of flu, coronavirus, insomnia, and OCD flareups. They have also told me that they may need to stand up and stretch during class, and that they are fine but experiencing stress because of ongoing health concerns that would make the virus more dangerous to them if they caught it. While some of these factors are situational, others are part of the students' ongoing physical and mental lives, and I wonder if they would feel as comfortable sharing their challenges with me at a time when they had less expectation of

support. What can we do under normal circumstances to make clear to students that we do not see them as a (neurotypical) brain in a vat, and that their education can accommodate care for their health? Can we be more thoughtful about language on the syllabus, more empathic in how we treat deadlines and absences?

Students find grades stressful.

My students took midterms shortly before my school's transition to Zoom. As I was working on grading them, the school announced that all courses for the semester would be default pass/fail unless the student explicitly requested a letter grade. Realizing that thinking about grades could be an unnecessary additional source of stress, I gave my students three options: they could get feedback with a grade; they could get feedback with no grade; or I could just tell them whether or not they passed. I had takers for all three choices. What would it look like to come up with evaluation and feedback systems that keep students apprised of how they are doing in the course, while accounting for the fact that grades can carry unhelpful emotional weight and even detract from their' ability to take in feedback? Can we grant students more agency in how and when they receive feedback from us?

Students get the most out of active learning.

I am teaching two classes this semester. One is a seminar with 18 students, and the other is a course built around *hevruta*, a Jewish practice of reading and discussing texts aloud in pairs. Of the two, the *hevruta* course has been vastly more successful over Zoom. The students were already spending more than 50% of in-class time in paired group work, and when they transitioned to doing so online, they remained engaged and active. What would it be like post-pandemic to consider what keeps students engaged during class time, whether it is happening online or not?

My institution, like most others, does not yet know what classes will look like in September. As I begin to think about my fall courses, my intention is that my increased awareness of student needs will continue to inform my pedagogy—regardless of whether I will be teaching virtually or in a physical classroom.

https://wabash.center/2020/06/empathy-in-education-after-covid-19/