The crummiest semester ever? A survival guide for spring 2021

Anna Lännström, *Stonehill College*

Blog Series: Online Teaching, Online Learning
March 19, 2021
Tags: Pandemic fatigue | setting priorities | writing assignments | hyflex teaching | virtual teaching

I have a feeling that this is going to be the crummiest semester of my teaching career. We're tired here at my small undergraduate Catholic college outside of Boston. I've toggled back and forth between classes on Zoom and in person. As a result of all that, we're now several weeks into the semester, and I saw some of my students' faces for the first time yesterday. Well, the top half anyway. I'm sick of masks.

The parts of the faces that I could see look tired. In fact, my students look about as exhausted as they usually do right before Thanksgiving. They tell me they are drained from the isolation, the uncertainty, and threat of going remote again. I am exhausted too. And we're just halfway through a 15-week semester with no spring break (like many colleges, we canceled it to keep positivity rates down).

All mental health numbers seem to go in the wrong direction. The college keeps sending out resources about support groups and numbers to call. I just got an email from my dean urging us to cut students' workload this semester, to monitor their mental health, and to care for ourselves as well.

At this point, my preference would be to cancel the rest of the semester so that we can all sleep until May but since that probably is not an option, I'm going to follow my dean's advice.

It's triage time.

Here's my plan and survival guide:

1. Give the students more time to write their papers

When the students in my gen ed classes have a paper due, they won't have any reading assignments. Instead, they'll submit three topic ideas on Monday, a shitty first draft on Wednesday, and the actual paper on Friday. We'll use our class time on Monday and Wednesday as informal paper workshops. I won't read the drafts at all; I'll simply check that they submitted them. I'll invite them to talk to me or visit the Writing Center if they want feedback.

2. Don't teach any new materials

In an optimistic moment in December, I included several new readings on the syllabus for my brand-new Catholic intellectual tradition course. They are good readings and they would improve the course. But I don't know how to teach them. Honestly, I can't even remember what they were about. So I'm going to skip them altogether and instead use materials I know well. I'll accept that my Catholic intellectual tradition course will be light on Catholic readings this semester, and I'll rely heavily on theology major Joe in the class to bring an informed Catholic perspective to our discussions.

3. Cancel classes

In case you haven't noticed, teaching and learning on Zoom is much harder and less effective than having class in person. Because of that, I'm going to avoid having class on Zoom whenever I can:

- If we get another snowstorm (did I mention I live in the Northeast?), I'll just cancel class. I suspect we'll get more learning done that way because it will give us a chance to rest and it will generate good will. Both will increase the chances of us having a good class when we're back in the classroom the next day, so I'm trading two mediocre meetings for one good one. It'll be worth it.
- If we must go remote again, I'll cut back on class time for the students. We'll all have class on Monday and then half will attend on Wednesdays and the rest on Fridays. I didn't do this before because I couldn't figure out how to have them use that extra hour without generating tons of extra work for myself (I've never had good luck with independent work for first year gen ed students). But now I have a plan. I'll simply tell them to spend the extra time on the next homework assignment and choose not to feel guilty about it.

4. Stop obsessing about Zoom tuneout

It's harder to pay attention on Zoom, and we've all spent hours trying to figure out how to keep our students engaged. I'm done. I give up. I refuse to adopt my colleagues' increasingly draconian suggestions. I don't want to create a teaching environment filled with mistrust and even if I did, I don't think it would work. The students are so tired that pushing them more won't help.

I'll focus on those who are physically in the classroom and those on Zoom who are paying attention. I'll remember that some of the students who keep their cameras off and refuse to talk really are listening. (I know that because I've seen their writing.) I'll accept that some won't pay attention. I'll keep checking in on those who seem to disappear, referring them out as needed.

Most of all, I'll remember that it's not personal. They are tuning out because they are exhausted and sick of Zoom, not because they want to disrespect me and my class.

5.Help the students cope

Last week, a first-year student looked out at me from his Zoom box on my computer and asked, "Is it always going to be like this?" Suddenly, they were all paying attention, looking at me, intently. I put on my best confident professorial voice and said 'no.' I agreed that it feels like that now but I talked about vaccines and hope. But I also acknowledged that this semester will suck. And I promised that we'd muddle through it together. We will.

Notes:

I wish I had invented the phrase 'shitty first draft', but I got it from Anne Lamott. It's from her essay "Shitty first drafts" in *Bird by Bird* – great essay! I did create the lazy staged assignment described above all by myself though.

https://wabash.center/2021/03/survival-guide-for-spring-semester-2021-possibly-the-crummiest -semester-ever/