

Short Communication

Redesigning (virtual) learning with a “love ethic” in the wake of COVID-19

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1. Introduction

Faced with unprecedented challenges, students continue to learn during a global pandemic. This new atmosphere of learning comes with a host of challenges, ranging from financial hardships to mental and physical exhaustion. Students and faculty have had to make the shift to online learning, in some instances, in a matter of days. Despite the technological, emotional, and embodied hardships associated with the switch to online learning, educators must still remain committed to supporting thoughtful and innovative student learning. Perhaps the best method for overcoming these new challenges is the power of kindness, or what feminist scholar bell hooks has named a “love ethic”. This human-centered approach to teaching is the process of utilizing “all the dimensions of love – ‘care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge’ – in our everyday lives” (Hooks, 2000, p. 94). While hooks’ ideology has been around for more than 20 years, I believe this paradigm should reemerge as the standard that guides instruction and research in the LIS profession. This shift should extend beyond the era of COVID-19 and remain a cornerstone of not only classroom learning, but also for the implementation of new theories, policies, practices, and reflexive understandings of information studies”.

2. Modeling a “love ethic”

As a current MLIS graduate student and teaching associate at UCLA, I have the unique perspective of both student and educator. As an instructor, I am responsible for guiding students through the writing and research process in introductory writing courses. In redesigning my spring 2020 course to meet the circumstances of a global

pandemic, I adopted UCLA Professor Michelle Caswell’s model for learning objectives (Caswell, 2020). In order to present the (virtual) classroom as a place focused on compassion and care, the following model was developed:

Learning objectives:

1. Survive, individually and collectively
2. Do so with as much of our mental and physical health intact as possible
3. Learn about research and writing

If objective 3 is getting in the way of objectives 1 and 2, please let me know and we will work it out together.

Reinforcing a “love ethic,” this model begins on the most important point: survival. In the first two objectives, the wellbeing of students supplants the traditional priority of research and writing. And in unifying these objectives, there is a stipulation that orients personal wellness as a learning outcome for the course. Knowing that students have asymmetrical access to technology, quiet spaces, and free time, this model aims to redesign learning as secondary to self-care. Pointedly, these issues of access are not just associated with COVID-19, as digital inequities and mental health conditions affect many students, especially students of color and those from low-income backgrounds (Francis & Horn, 2017; Gonzales et al., 2018). We must move towards creating a permanent space where student needs, regardless of their relationship to classroom learning, are met with an aura of compassion, understanding – and most importantly – advocacy.

A “love ethic” is only as useful as the praxis it evokes. Without access to the physical library, many of my students have had difficulty performing research without the ability to consult print materials. While online resources at UCLA are robust, these collections cannot fully replace the physical resources that have no online surrogate or exist behind a pay wall. In order to support this divide, I have reached out to several publishing companies, such as those owned by Taylor and Francis Group, in order to request access to e-copies of journal articles and eBooks. Many of these publishing companies have been happy to oblige and provide access to resources that are usually priced at exorbitant amounts. With a “love ethic” in mind, this tractable exchange of information should not be limited to the COVID-19 crisis. Instead, students should have easier access to learning materials, and information professionals should be stronger advocates for facilitating this exchange. Publishing companies, although mainly interested in private profits, should also consider how they can disrupt their traditional tiers of service and make their collections more visible and accessible to users. With educators and librarians coming together to facilitate and teach the sometimes-bureaucratic research process, students will likely be better able to focus on objectives one and two: survival and personal wellness. The hope is that advocacy-based instruction provides students the ability to succeed, feel human, and see education as a partnership of learning.

3. Conclusion

Advocating for information access is just one example of how we can create a “love ethic” beyond the borders of COVID-19. Transformative efforts are grounded in the power of kindness. Calling upon the ideas of Native American writer Deborah Miranda, we must treat this pandemic as a mosaic. There will be no return to normal at the end of COVID-19, but we can try to move forward by considering how the broken pieces of our current educational practices can be reassembled to create a new image of learning. As Miranda states, commenting on the fragments of tribal memory: “[. . .] if we pick up the pieces and use them in new ways that honor their integrity, their colors, textures, stories – then we do those pieces justice, no matter how sharp they are, no matter how much handling them slices our fingers and makes us bleed” (Miranda, 2012, p. 135).

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