

## **Thirty minutes is a small price to pay: Care, creativity, and community-building**

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This essay is an overview of three lessons that the author learned while teaching during the pandemic. In making adjustments to her courses, she realized the importance of purposeful care, creativity, and community-building. As the title implies, all three can be achieved by committing just thirty minutes.

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“Business as usual” is what I kept telling myself as I watched colleagues struggle with the radical shift from face to face to online teaching in the Spring. As a faculty member in a 100% online program with more than ten years of online learning/teaching experience, I thought that the pandemic would have little effect on my pedagogy or productivity. If anything, I thought that the redirection of administrative resources and attention, and canceled meetings and service obligations would result, for me, in increased scholarly activity. I soon discovered the flaw in that logic.

Within two weeks, I began to feel the stress and emotional toll of the “new normal” resulting from the nationwide stay-at-home order. I experienced an overwhelming sense of powerlessness, like I was stuck in the cartoon quicksand of my youth. Many colleagues I spoke with reported feeling the same. During the first two months of the pandemic, I did little beyond what was absolutely required to fulfill my job responsibilities, instead sitting mindlessly in front of the TV. Meanwhile, I virtually observed friends and colleagues baking piles of bread, getting creative with new hobbies, and churning out scholarship. Much has already been written about the disconnect between these two very different reactions to the feelings of anxiety and uncertainty caused by the pandemic as well as the reasons behind them, both within academia and in the mainstream. What’s important for the purposes of this essay is to note which side I fell on and that I recognized the symptoms.

### **1. Lesson One: Care**

Because I fell into the *Quagmire of Ennui*, as I came to call it, I was able to sympathize with my students, who largely work in the K-12 system. I recognized that they were probably also having similar experiences. Not only that, but they were also being expected to move instruction into a format they had not been trained to use, and

many were monitored in a way I can only refer to as excessive micromanagement. Further, the vast majority of my students also became simultaneously responsible for 24/7 childcare and education within their own families. Realizing that they needed the same grace that I was affording myself, I went to work reviewing my courses in an effort to determine how I could best eliminate some of the stressors from their lives. I discarded a few assignments, canceled some synchronous sessions, and urged students to focus on themselves and their families.

Within moments of emailing my students with these changes, my inbox was flooded with thanks, not just for lightening their load, but also for caring and encouraging them to take care. What was simple and easy for me and required only a few keystrokes on my laptop, for them was a beacon in the darkness that we were all experiencing. In my Spring 2020 evaluations, the concept of caring for my students was mentioned more than any other.

Lesson One: Human beings want to experience genuine care and concern. The thirty minutes it took for me to make adjustments to my courses and send the emails was a small price to pay to express my genuine care and concern. In my experience there's no better way to build individual relationships with students than to care.

## **2. Lesson Two: Creativity**

When I began considering which assignments to cut and which to keep, I looked closely at the visual journaling component of my courses. Visual journaling (in the pedagogical context) is a practice that uses mixed media (images, words, etc.) in either a physical journal or digital format as a way to synthesize content and express understanding. The simplicity of visual expression is accessible for all students and provides quick assessment of learning for the instructor. I've been using visual journaling as a creative means of synthesizing learning for the past two years and am part of a small research group that employs visual journaling during our meetings, both as a tool for exploring research topics and as a tool for self-care. My research group continued to meet virtually during the pandemic, and I thought about how much I looked forward to that creative outlet, especially since I couldn't seem to motivate myself to be creative on my own. With that in mind, I kept the visual journaling assignment and had students focus on creating a visual representation of what they were experiencing during the pandemic.

Again, the response was positive and I was encouraged to incorporate creativity into my last synchronous session of the semester since changes to the final assignment meant that I had eliminated final presentations. I made the session optional, but more than half of each of my three classes showed up. I called it *Kindergarten in Higher Ed* and I included show and tell, story time, and art. We all had a great time sharing our quickly drawn pictures of the frivolous things we missed most during the stay-at-home order. And, during the summer session, students expressed how much they missed visual journaling, which was not a part of those classes.

Lesson Two: Human beings crave creative outlets. The thirty minutes it took for me to put that last class together was a small price to pay to see the joy on my students' faces as they shared their creations. In my experience, there's no better method of self-expression than some form of creativity.

### **3. Lesson Three: Community building**

When we gathered again for synchronous sessions a month into the pandemic, I set aside 30 minutes of my two-hour class for students to just share. They expressed their personal and professional concerns, commiserated over shared experiences, and even discussed shows, books, and hobbies that were keeping them distracted from reality. I can honestly say that these classes, in the middle of a global pandemic, were the most enjoyable I've ever experienced. I've always felt that I do a fairly good job of creating community and bonding with my students, but the Spring 2020 semester made me realize otherwise. This realization gave me pause to think about how I might translate the lessons I learned from this bizarre semester into my practice moving forward.

In my Summer 2020 courses, I again set aside 30 minutes in the first class for open discussion. I was pleasantly surprised at the enthusiastic participation and willingness to share, especially since around 75% of my students were new to the program. This is a great reminder that we need to consider the whole student in instruction, and I will continue to provide informal community-building opportunities in all of my classes going forward.

Lesson Three: Human beings want to belong and they want to be seen. Thirty minutes is a small price to pay to ensure that this happens. In my experience, there's no better way to increase student engagement than to build community.

### **4. Conclusion**

Like all pedagogical revelations, I will put these three practices through a continuous improvement process, but I feel confident that their implementation will serve to improve my courses. I won't go so far as to say that I am thankful for the pandemic (that would be ludicrous), but I am thankful for what I am taking away from this period in time that I can then apply pedagogically. COVID-19 has fundamentally changed who I am as an instructor, and I am grateful for the opportunity to learn and to grow.

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