Learning from Pandemic Pedagogy: Empathy and Care In University Classrooms

COVID-19 radically changed pedagogy in university settings. Teaching and learning underwent massive transformations as faculty adopted new technologies and modes of instruction. To better serve vulnerable students during COVID-19, faculty made interventions to courses and pedagogy focusing on themes of empathy and care. As educators, we use autoethnography to reflect on strategies that incorporate empathy and care into pedagogy during the pandemic. We then identify pragmatic, faculty-led interventions in pedagogy that promote more equitable learning experiences for university students, both during the pandemic and in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: *COVID-19, pandemic pedagogy, empathy, care, classroom practices.*

COVID-19 radically changed pedagogy in university settings. Teaching and learning underwent massive transformations as faculty adopted new technologies and modes of instruction (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021). These transformations included "emergency remote teaching" which defined mid-semester transitions experienced at many North American universities in March 2020. But they also include online instruction and various modes of hybrid learning (Miller, Sellnow & Strawser, 2021). Technological, technical, and logistical aspects of university pedagogy were significant concerns amongst higher education institutions. These were addressed through technological fixes (Ashfaquzzaman, 2020). Universities installed web cameras and microphones in classrooms. Campuses established social distancing guidelines and surveillance of community health by way of apps, contact tracing, and frequent COVID-19 testing. Instructors adopted remote learning software such as Zoom and Kaltura.

Through these measures, university teaching and learning continued and evolved during the pandemic. Yet pandemic pedagogy, which must support vulnerable students experiencing irregular and disruptive learning circumstances, requires forms of faculty-led interventions that cannot be addressed simply through adopting new software packages or increasing familiarity with online learning platforms. To positively serve students during trying times, institutions and faculty must actively pursue a pedagogy of care, defined broadly as pedagogy committed to ensuring students have the support they need to complete a course (Ba, 2021).

Developing and practicing a pedagogy of care requires faculty to refocus their courses, design, policies, and instruction around the concept of empathy (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021). In the following, we—humanities and social science faculty members teaching at a public, Hispanic-Serving Institution in west central Texas—reflect on how we grappled with and refocused our teaching on empathy, making it a central component of an evolving pedagogy of care. To do so, we document and reflect on our experiences of pandemic teaching, a technique used by humanities and social sciences professionals to improve practice, including teaching and pedagogy (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Dinkelman, 2003; Huber, 2010). We then identify pragmatic,

faculty-led interventions in pedagogy that promote more equitable learning experiences for university students, both during the pandemic and in a post-pandemic world.

On Reflective (Collaborative) Writing

Collaborative research and writing are well established within scholarly communication (Wuchty, Jones & Uzzi, 2007). However, we view this article as a divergence from the norm of academic writing. This divergence merits explanation. During initial planning, we decided to write collaboratively the introduction and main article objectives. As interdisciplinary scholars, however, we then reflected on our specific disciplinary contexts while thinking through what it means to refocus teaching around themes of empathy and care. Subsequently, we wrote narratives in isolation from one another. After drafting, we shared them with one another and reflected on our individual contributions before collaboratively writing our concluding recommendations. Our objective was to find "attractive concepts and useful methods from neighboring fields […] to borrow and adapt for the study and solution of pedagogical problems" (Huber, 2006, p. 69).

This writing process represents research and scholarship that views academic writing as a way of knowing and as qualitative method (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; DeLyser & Hawkins, 2014). What follows is a form of community-based autoethnography. As method, community-based autoethnography draws from researchers' personal experiences to address social and cultural issues within the specific communities to which the researchers belong (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Community-based ethnography is fundamentally participatory. It helps nurture a sense of shared community. Moreover, it is socially responsive to community needs and demands (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009). Here, we retrospectively write about shared experiences vis-à-vis the (still ongoing) COVID-19 pandemic that contributes to our development as higher education faculty.

A Historian's Experience

Cultivating Empathy: The Early Days of the Pandemic (March-May 2020)

In her best-selling memoir *Testament of Youth*, English nurse Vera Brittain (1935) recounted her experience of the First World War: "When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans" (p. 7). Living through historical moments can be exciting or tragic. However, more often than not, the experience is disruptive and "exasperating." In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was certainly the case for me. I recognized I was relatively lucky. I worked remotely at home and rarely ventured into the outside world except to buy groceries. During the pandemic's initial spread in the United States, I had the singular, frustrating task of teaching courses online originally designed to be face-to-face. Otherwise, the unfolding catastrophe passed me by.

University students, however, struggled with impossible situations. With little notice, universities compelled them to leave dormitories. Employers required them to work extended hours. Others lost their jobs and wondered how they would pay their rent. Students with children had to juggle not only their own coursework, but also childcare and their children's education at home. And this was on top of illness and anxiety about the pandemic (Head, 2020). Previous

training in online teaching led me to believe weekly assignments and short lectures delivered asynchronously would give my students much needed flexibility amidst the turmoil created by COVID-19 (Field, 2020). Some students expressed appreciation for this approach. But others struggled with online learning and the sudden increase in work completed in isolation from faculty and other students. Some simply did not have the technology or Internet access to handle full online course loads. Before transitioning online, I surveyed students about their experiences and preferences with online coursework and access to technology. This data collection was necessary to gain initial awareness about the problems students faced.

In hindsight, I could have surveyed them again a week or two into the online portion of the semester. The benefits of continuing surveys are twofold. First, it would maintain my awareness of students' changing experiences of the pandemic. Second, it would maintain a line of communication with students. Keeping these lines of communication open is an essential way to manage relationships between students and instructors in online courses. Additionally, midterm student evaluations provide feedback useful for course improvement and can result in better end-of-term evaluations. Collaborative midterm evaluations could have offered opportunities for engagement during a time when many students felt isolated and missed interactions with peers (Veeck, O'Reilly, MacMillan, & Yu, 2015; McMurtrie, 2020).

After limping to the finish line of the Spring 2020 semester, I wondered what I could have done differently. Ultimately, I needed to cultivate awareness about the struggles students faced and then use this knowledge to build flexibility into course structure, delivery, and policies.

Empathy and Flexibility in Course Design and Delivery: A Year of Hybrid Teaching (Fall 2020-Spring 2021)

During the 2020-2021 academic year, my university largely offered hybrid courses. I chose to have all students attend weekly face-to-face sections supplemented with online lectures and low-stakes quizzes to access learning and hold them accountable. I hoped active weekly course meetings would keep students motivated, engaged, and promote retention rates (Euzent, Martin, Moskal, & Moskal 2011). Students unable to attend in-person meetings due to illness, quarantining, or concern for vulnerable family members, completed make-up assignments and received individual feedback (Culbert, 2021).

Research suggests hybrid pedagogy should pursue a "less is more" approach to reduce workload and avoid cognitive overload (Cohn, 2021). Thus, during face-to-face meetings, I guided students through activities that would teach important historical skills including close reading and primary source analysis. I shared optional resources and readings for students with the time and interest to delve further. Keeping the lessons of Spring 2020 in mind, the possibility of mid-semester transitions necessitated incorporating flexibility as a guiding principle in my course design.

Moving forward, syllabi need to be designed to accommodate different modes of course delivery—whether 100% face-to-face, hybrid, or online. Simple contingency plans allow instructors to make changes quickly. Clear communication of those plans reduces student confusion and anxiety (Henry Hulett, 2021). I do this in my syllabi by selecting a topic or theme for each week. If a pivot to online instruction occurs, the overall trajectory remains the same.

Teaching Empathy: Reflecting on Historical Empathy in the Classroom

Instructors should not only cultivate empathy themselves, but they should also build it into the curriculum. For instance, in the discipline of history, historical empathy is a crucial concept. Historical empathy is the "process of understanding people in the past by contextualizing their actions" (Brooks, 2008, p. 130). By systematically investigating a historical figure's background, socioeconomic status, and historical context, students learn to identify beliefs and perspectives that may differ from their own. By stepping into the shoes of their predecessors, students better understand historical actors and the decisions they made as well as the people and world around them (Rantala, Manninen, & van den Berg, 2015; Rubenhold, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer to teaching historical empathy as students experience the disruptions of a world historical event themselves. During the pandemic, some instructors and institutions asked students to record their own experiences as oral histories to create a record for future students and researchers (Oral History Association, 2021). By doing so, students gained a deeper understanding of the construction of history – as based on firsthand accounts and original artifacts – while simultaneously processing their own experiences and developing resiliency (Brinker, 2020).

COVID-19 is a global, shared experience instructors can use as a jumping-off point to teach students empathy (historical or otherwise). Students are now equipped with firsthand understandings of how large-scale historical events disrupt everyday life. With guidance, they can use this insight to step into the shoes of historical (and contemporary) figures more easily, interpret the past, and more firmly grasp how people like Vera Brittain felt at the outset of the First World War.

A Geographer's Experience

COVID-19 forced transitions to emergency remote teaching and raised new pedagogical questions. How would I restructure assignments and classes designed for face-to-face instruction (Miller, 2020)? In what ways could I ensure course instruction and learning outcomes remain aligned? Could I prevent academic dishonesty (Supiano, 2020)? Did students have access to the materials and technologies they needed for success in new formats (Ba, 2021)? What home contexts affected students' learning and welfare? How had students' employment and caregiving statuses changed? Would students transition successfully to new learning modes requiring self-motivation and independent inquiry? *Were students OK* (Lederer, Hoban, Lipson, Zhou, & Eisenberg, 2021)?

Grappling with these questions jumpstarted reflection on pedagogy as care work. Care work "embraces responsibility, yet […] forces attention to the mediation and embeddedness of responsible relations in the interpersonal contact zones of the classroom" (Newstead, 2009, p. 80). Pedagogy as care work extends beyond simple instruction. It requires instructors to draw on components of emotional intelligence and develop holistic approaches to their craft. During the transition online and subsequent semesters, I identified three related areas of pedagogy I improved with heightened attention to care: 1) course design; 2) efforts centering student health and welfare; and 3) adaptation of geography course content to develop a class-wide ethic of care.

Overhauling Course Design

Like other educators, adopting hybrid and online modalities required massive overhauls of teaching methods (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Initially, I implemented anonymous surveys soliciting student information regarding internet and hardware access (Ba, 2021). From their answers, I learned many did not have working laptops or high-speed internet. Consequently, I switched to asynchronous course structures. I rewrote syllabi, culled overly ambitious course schedules, and relaxed deadlines (Gooblar, 2021). I replaced exams with more frequent low-stakes open-book assessments requiring students to research course topics or concepts. Alternately, they completed short self-reflective exercises focusing on personal learning trajectories (Supiano, 2019; Darby, 2020; Johnson, 2021). I converted assignments to digital formats. Additionally, I offered students structured choices in project topics and deliverables (Johnson, 2021).

In all these decisions, I deliberately shared the underlying logic of course designs with students. I followed up with requests for anonymous feedback on how well course structures and deliveries met their learning needs. These interventions were student-centric. They were technological and structural fixes intended to preserve students' ability to complete a course. Yet, they also streamlined my workload during a particularly stressful time to be an instructor. In retrospect, these decisions were moments when I had an awareness of both student needs and self-awareness of my own limits, and I adjusted the course accordingly.

I continue to implement these practices and considerations and will do so post-pandemic. Surveying students, for example, taught me the value of gathering anonymous information about factors shaping their learning experiences. Cultivating an awareness of students' needs is an essential pedagogical practice. I now embrace the flexibility offered by open-ended written assignments rather than exams. Many students informed me submitting written work instead of exams alleviated anxiety. Others appreciated exploring concepts on their own terms and in alignment with personal interests.

A bonus to ditching exams for written work, I now learn from student submissions in ways I did not while grading exams. Relatedly, I find more students recommend books, films, and other resources they feel connect with course concepts. Through sharing, students actively engage in knowledge production in ways they had not prior to the pandemic, transforming teacher-student dynamics into reciprocal partnerships (Rees, Hawthorne, Scott, Solìs, & Spears, 2021). These practices draw on my own emotional intelligence competencies while simultaneously developing students' competencies in self-regulation, motivation, and social skills (Majeski, Stover, Valais & Ronch, 2017).

Centering Student Health and Welfare

The pandemic forced faculty to understand learning as intimately tied to student health and well-being. For many, the pandemic initiated extreme mental health vulnerability characterized by heightened feelings of stress, anxiety, loneliness, and grief (Ashfaquzzaman, 2020; Brown, 2021). Faculty served important roles in connecting students to mental health professionals. Interventions—such as raising student awareness of campus mental health resources, checking in via e-mail or during office hours, or recognizing symptoms of stress and/or deteriorating mental health—all became central components of course syllabi, announcements, and class time (Briwa, 2021; Goddard & Rich, 2021). Anecdotal evidence suggested these efforts benefit students. Anonymous teaching evaluations noted appreciation for transparent communication surrounding mental health in higher education. One student thanked me via e-mail. They wrote they felt

uniquely supported by my acknowledgment of challenges associated with navigating mental health. Others told me they sought professional help at my advice. These stories matter.

Universities have a responsibility to support students' physical welfare during COVID-19. University top-down policies include mask mandates, classroom seating capacities, and/or surveillance testing of students, faculty, and staff for COVID-19 symptoms. Faculty, however, can enhance student welfare through course design. For example, during the pandemic, I learned to design course materials and delivery that offer a seamless transition to digital learning as needed. Students could therefore pursue remote-learning options according to their personal needs. This is necessary: some students request to transition fully online because they live with vulnerable family members, their caregiving responsibilities change, or because they experience traumatic events requiring extensive therapy. Accommodating requests to work remotely is a viable and ethically correct option to meet students' welfare needs.

Teaching an Ethic of Care

Like history, geography reframes students' understanding of the world and their position within it. Geography teaches cross-cultural sensitivities "in ways that multiply rather than narrow understandings, open rather than close ways of relating, and enable rather than dis-able modes of engaging" (Newstead, 2009, p. 81). To multiply understandings, geographers must adapt their subject matter to develop student empathy and care for others. The COVID-19 pandemic offered ways for geographers to achieve this goal.

The pandemic's global impacts demonstrate the importance of geographical thinking. Geographical thinking pays attention to spatial variability, values spatio-temporal analyses, recognizes interconnections between human and environmental systems, and integrates interscalar perspectives (Hanson, 2004). Throughout the pandemic, I adjusted course materials to encourage geographical thinking, particularly in reframing students' relative positions to other people and places. For example, in world regional geography I implemented comparative research on state-led pandemic mitigation efforts. I then required students to identify factors explaining the spatial variation of effective mitigation strategies. In a seminar, I asked students to keep pandemic journals, which documented their experiences and fit their lives into the pandemic's socio-economic impacts at local and regional scales. In a final project, one option encouraged students to explore questions of refugee conditions during a pandemic. Many drew direct comparisons between their personal pandemic experiences and those of other vulnerable people. While sometimes uncomfortable, these pandemic-based projects and assessments helped students master geographical concepts while developing empathy and care for others.

Empathy and Care: Learning from COVID-19

Since 2020, the pandemic has waxed, waned, and evolved. Some basic kindness, patience, and empathy go a long way to help students navigate university during uncertain times. Furthermore, instructors can approach their courses not only with empathy, but also guided by emotional intelligence and forethought. Through the process of collaborative, reflective writing we discovered a number of shared pedagogical concerns that transcended disciplinary boundaries and coalesced around themes of awareness, resiliency, communication, and empathy. Following individual reflection and collaborative discussion, we offer four take-away suggestions for faculty teaching in a (post-)COVID-19 landscape:

1) **Cultivate awareness of student needs** — Survey your students before, during, and at the end of the semester about challenges they face, questions they have, and their needs. By collecting data and responding sensitively, students will see your empathy and you will better serve them during difficult times (Veeck, O'Reilly, MacMillan, & Yu, 2015).
2) **Embrace campus and community resources** — In order to learn, students need basic needs met. Make yourself familiar with campus resources such as the counseling center, food bank, and COVID-19 vaccination clinics and testing. After gaining familiarity with these resources, introduce them in the classroom to raise awareness, normalize, and destigmatize their use (Briwa, 2021; Zakrajsek, 2021). Taking these steps will enable students to empower themselves by making them more resilient in developing skills of self-regulation.
3) **Practice transparent communication** — When your university requires pivoting to new instructional modes, clearly communicate course changes and explain why you made these changes (Henry Hulett, 2021). This not only opens a clear line of communication with students, but also students will appreciate your transparency and care in crafting their learning experience.
4) **Teach empathy, understanding, and resilience** — As instructors, empathy is an important muscle to train. Careful pedagogy encourages student resilience during trying times. Yet through pedagogy, we can also model empathy, guiding students towards deeper care for others and towards honing their emotional intelligence. Ultimately, students may forget course content but will carry empathy into a post-pandemic world.

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