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## Understanding Student Needs During a Pandemic

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As the 2020 Spring Break approached, I was relieved that I would get a much-needed week to relax. I was keenly aware of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I was concerned, but I never considered what would take place over spring break and the weeks thereafter. Midway through the break, my university sent out an email informing faculty, students, and staff that spring break would be extended one additional week. At the time, I was delighted, until I got an additional email informing faculty that we should prepare to move all our classes online for the remainder of the semester. I had taught online before but not converted a class midsemester to an online format through the ever-changing Blackboard learning management system (LMS). As I was dutifully working through the adjustment, faculty were asked to contact students and inquire about how they would manage the move to online learning. I sent out an email to all my composition students, requesting a response about how they would feel about the transition. I asked, for example, if they had reliable access to the internet and, generally, how they were doing in relation to the growing pandemic. As responses trickled in, I realized moving to the online format should be one of my lesser concerns and my focus should be on paying attention to students' emotional well-being.

While some students expressed no concern about the move to online instruction, others described increasing anxiety about the transition. This anxiety was driven partly by their impression that they could not learn online or that they needed face-to-face (f2f) instruction. As many teachers know, one of the benefits and strengths of our profession is interacting (in person) with students. I am no different in that regard. Often before class officially begins, I chitchat with students and get to know them better in a low-stakes setting. Since the directive to move online came midsemester, I felt students would be able to adapt to the shift. Most did with few hiccups, but others simply faded away despite my best efforts at communication.

For the students that were able to continue in the course, I decided to trim down some of the in-class types of assignment, which included freewrites and peer workshops. Since I used Blackboard mostly as a gradebook, I was uncomfortable trying to learn and teach the various options of the LMS in the condensed time of half a semester. My class became, therefore, asynchronous with videos and emails. Most students appreciated the easy shift and decrease in the number of assignments, and my focus became the long papers of a typical first-year composition course, such as a research paper. But again, I slowly realized that even with the reduced workload, students still seemed to be struggling.

At the end of the semester and in their reflective final, some students recognized the world had changed. One student, N. T. Kern,<sup>1</sup> wrote, "Being part of the newer generation, I honestly had not registered what this virus really was. I thought that I was having an extra week off from school to enjoy the island, little did I know." N. T. Kern was referring to South Padre Island, which is near our university and is a well-known spring break spot. Another student, Abanga, wrote about how he recognized the seriousness of the pandemic: "In the

beginning, it was terrible. Nobody knew what was occurring and the entire country went into a panicking frenzy.” Both of these students offered insight into their understanding of the period around the spring break shift. N. T. Kern expressed more reflection and Abanga expressed some naivety and concern, but each seemed to be mostly isolated from other effects of the pandemic. Other students were not.

Another student, Joshua, encountered several obstacles. He had planned on returning to campus after spring break and getting a job because his financial aid had run out. The pandemic curtailed that plan. As a result, in early April, he couldn’t pay rent. Joshua described in his reflective final how some landlords were extending rent due dates, but his was not. He wrote, “My landlord kicked me out on the 3rd day of the month of April,” and he was forced to move back home with only half of his belongings. His family didn’t have room for his stuff or his dog, so he crashed on a friend’s couch. His friend happened to have a computer, which allowed him to catch up on some assignments. Joshua eventually found a job but, at the time of writing his reflective final, had not yet received his first paycheck. During this period, my emails to Joshua had gone unanswered, and he seemed to have fallen off the map. I felt this was odd since he was an engaged and hardworking student while in class. When he reconnected, he was very apologetic and expressed a desire to catch up any way he could, which he later did.

Hunter, a first-generation college student, wrote about his experience moving back home. He admitted, “My household isn’t the best.” As many instructors know, first-gen students have challenges at home, which Hunter described well: “My dad wasn’t really worried about me getting my schoolwork done. He wanted me out in the yard or the barn helping him fix things every day.” Over the years, I have taught many first-gen students who have described to me how their families do not seem to understand *outside-the-classroom* learning; instead, their parents’ experience is such that when they are physically at school, they are learning, but when they leave, learning is over until the next day in class. In other words, as Hunter pointed out, his dad believed that when he was not in or at school, he was available to do the daily chores and other tasks. For Hunter, this created additional stress; he wrote,

All these constant distractions between my dad’s emotional self and my new way of learning made everything so stressful. I had got to the point of my eyes full of tears, and I so wanted to quit and give up college.

For Hunter, COVID-19 was a secondary or even tertiary stressor in his life. He wanted to spend time on his schoolwork, but being home hindered his progress.

Nevertheless, classes carried on. As papers came in, they were markedly shorter, less focused, and lackluster in what are usually stronger elements of student writing in my courses. As the pandemic whirled across the globe like a tornado, whipping through Italy and some other countries, I soon realized I, too, was getting anxious about increasing numbers of infected in New York City and other hot spots. That anxiety, I hope, didn’t transfer to my class because the videos I made, which focused on specific elements of the course, were intended to be positive and high-energy. One might argue that the weaker writing I received from students was the result of decreased engagement from the course having gone online and asynchronous. This is a valid point, but others might argue that COVID affected students’ ability to focus on a writing assignment that required dedicated attention.

Through late April, students were clearly anxious and concerned as COVID, now a pandemic, spread across the globe into the small town where my university is. Abanga wrote about some of his family members losing their jobs, and then he turned to the growing death toll, where he wrote, “it really struck fear into me.” Another student, Dominick Brooks, described concerns about returning home; his mother and little brother both had medical conditions, and his fear of infecting them weighed heavily on his mind. Students’ fear for their family was more persistent than any fear for their own well-being, based on their writing.

In fact, this fear of spreading it to family members was not isolated to Abanga and Dominick Brooks. D. Garza wrote, “Every fever, cough, sneeze, and ache in my body brings fear. ‘Do I have it? Did I spread it to my family? Where have I been the last two weeks?’” As teachers, we get to know our students and have a sense of their emotions and feelings. The pandemic generated reactions across the board in students, from casual whatevers to outright terror. D. Garza wrote about his grandmother, who was very ill, and then about other members of his family: “I worry that, no matter what I do, I will lose most of my family before this virus is contained.” Many students expressed a similar concern. At that time, their age group seemed mostly unaffected by COVID-19, but students did realize they could spread it to loved ones. At this point, my students had managed fairly well with the transition to our online course, but obviously, these concerns continued to surface.

Then a student requested to call me by phone. I try to keep communication with students confined to email, in-class discussions, or office hours. I can count on one hand how many students have actually called my office phone, but this student’s request was urgent, even after my attempt to discuss her issue through email. Since I was rarely in my office, I gave the student my cell phone number and said she was welcome to call.

There are moments in my teaching career that I can point to and definitively say they changed me. Little did I realize at the time, this phone call would be one of those moments. My cell rang and I answered. After the usual pleasantries, the student began to explain what she was going through, which she later expressed to me in writing too. She was newly pregnant; her husband might have COVID; her young child was taking online classes, and her older son was taking college classes online too on what she described as the family’s “antique laptop.” However, she explained how appreciative she was of our class and how I’d transitioned online and made sure to check in with students every few days, just like in our f2f class. Then, we discussed her writing and the required revision of one of her pieces. The discussion was lighthearted until she began describing another professor she had.

One of her other professors did not understand (or seem to care about) her circumstances, according to the student. This student, M. M. Hinojosa, was struggling in the professor’s class and called her one afternoon about four o’clock. The professor’s response was that her office hours were from 12:00 to 2:00, and as a student she needed to respect those defined hours. Hinojosa wrote that after apologizing to the professor, “[a] knot formed in my throat” as she tried to describe her concerns, including the family usage of the laptop and her husband’s health. According to Hinojosa, the professor scoffed and stated her own problems, which included having children and teaching classes.

After the phone call with that professor, Hinojosa reported something I was not expecting. She reached out to other classmates to inquire whether they thought she had overreacted to the professor. This, to me, was a mature and reasonable response that shows how concerned Hinojosa was that she didn’t cross a line and that she maintained respect and

understanding for the professor. Nevertheless, after consultations with other students, Hinojosa reached the conclusion that she was not out of line and began crying on the phone with her classmates, as they too felt the pressures of that course, the pandemic, and our new reality. As Hinojosa explained this to me, and since I know the other professor in question, I was understanding but remained neutral. Hinojosa explained that as a consequence of the professor's reaction and response, she changed her major.

As I mentioned, this phone call changed me, but I did not explain why or how. Honestly, I didn't want to talk on the phone with the student. I prefer not to talk on the phone with students because I stutter. But this student was persistent, and I felt comfortable enough that any dysfluencies I had would be understood. I knew this student was chatty and I was prepared for a long phone call, which it was. After several minutes, I realized this student needed reassurance, acknowledgement, and understanding. Yet she wasn't asking for special treatment. As she described some of the above, she started to cry. She was scared for her family, her husband, and her classes, even that other professor. And I sat there, unable to "do" anything but listen. As often as I feel like I can help students through just about anything, I knew now I could do nothing *but* listen. It was a humbling experience. Maybe I realized, finally, that as a teacher, I'm human after all.

Obviously, the realities of the past several months have created many different emotions for our students. But also for us as faculty. While many of us recognize that students have lives outside of our classes, rarely do these lives so clearly interact with our classes as they have during the current pandemic. Some students lost jobs. Others had to get jobs. Some students got COVID. Others lost family members to it. Some students faded away from class. Others thrived in the virtual environment. But I think it's safe to say, every student approached class differently as we moved online. Many of us approached teaching differently. Some of us posted weekly videos. Others sent out mass emails. Some of us focused on our LMS to convey information. Others ignored it completely. Many of us also found new ways and methods of teaching that we never had a need for, such as more utilization of our LMS.

And some students learned about themselves too. For example, N. T. Kern admitted, "This isolation time period has allowed me to become more independent and essentially an adult." Likewise, Jordan Schenkel wrote, "[Quarantine] made me realize who I was, but also what was important to me." As a teacher, one of my goals is to help and encourage students to mature and enter into the "adult" world confident and secure in their abilities. Both of these students expressed the importance of being alone, and I suspect focusing on some priorities without the hustle and bustle and distractions of what used to be "normal" life proved meaningful for them.

As I was reading all the potential student writings to quote from for this piece, not one student said they did not want to do the work or felt shortchanged by the move online. Rather, most students sought reasonable accommodations so they could complete the work. For some, it was more time. For others, it was a phone call of assurance. And for others, it was just the acknowledgement that this is *not* normal. Perhaps most of all, pandemic or not, students just wanted to know they were being heard.

"Empathy," wrote Lindsay Schneider (2020), "is the highest level of critical thinking" (para. 7). Of course, as teachers, we innately have some understanding of empathy and practice it every time we assist a student that needs just a little more support. We do this, I think, because we recognize the feeling of not getting something and needing more insight.

Now, we can use the experience of this terrible pandemic to show students how empathy acts as a “vital” element to understanding different perspectives and experiences (Schneider, 2020, para. 6). Along with the usual higher and lower order concerns we tackle with writing students, we can now guide them to “read consciously in a way that stimulates empathetic imagination” (Schneider, 2020, para. 11) that “truly sees, hears, and act[s] upon a world beyond [them]selves” (Schneider, 2020, para. 15). I think we can do this by encouraging students to remember the fears and concerns and experiences they have had to work through and thereby apply empathy as a component of their critical thinking skills, because they all have an understanding of what the pandemic was, is, and might become.

We find that this empathetic awareness, as I call it, is critical to being successful in any number of disciplines, such as social work, nursing, or psychology. By cultivating this awareness in our classrooms, we are encouraging students to “open [them]selves to the lives, feelings, and experiences of others” (Schneider, 2020, p. 8), so they can ultimately be more successful in their chosen profession. As I consider how I will adjust my teaching to incorporate more empathic awareness and understanding, I want to remember to ask myself, “How are students doing? What is happening in their lives? Are there any support services I can direct them to? How can I help them reflect, understand, and manage what they might be going through?” While these are questions I already ask, they now provide a new perspective and starting point for me. I recognize, too, that what we understood as normal is no longer normal, and I want to be sure I communicate with students, so we collectively recognize the need to empathize with the other.

Perhaps one student offered just the right amount of insight as we find our way through a precarious teaching environment. R. Silguero wrote,

Mostly everyone during these times isn’t in the best shape mentally as we’re going through hardships, and some professors chose not to take that into consideration leading to failing grades [. . .] and in the end, here we are bombarded with stress, work, and life in general.

She also wrote, “but bless the professors that did” take into account everything going on. Unfortunately, we are not through the hardships yet. As I write this, the fall semester is a week or so away. Schools are being encouraged to open despite medical and scientific advice to the contrary. Parents are uncertain about sending their children to school. Some schools have opened and have already shut down because of COVID spread. And we, the teachers, are stuck in the middle. We want to see our students in class and interact with them and have those meaningful little chats, but many of us are also aware of the realities and consequences of returning to the classroom. There are no easy or blanket answers. Regardless of what is decided, I realize I have to give students more freedom to express their feelings and concerns during this uncertain time. By providing for this empathic expression and understanding, I believe I’m helping them come to terms and better understand the complexity of how the pandemic is affecting them, because it *is* affecting them.

#### **Note**

<sup>1</sup>All quotes are from students and used with their written permission. Each student decided how their “name” would be cited in this writing. Some are real; some are pseudonyms. Quotes were lightly edited for readability.

**Reference**

Schneider, L. (2020, January 31). Empathy is the highest level of critical thinking. *National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)*. <https://ncte.org/blog/2020/01/empathy-highest-level-critical-thinking/>