BLOG POST

The Single Most Essential Requirement in Designing a Fall Online Course

By Cathy Davidson
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Topic

Teaching & Learning Practices

Sub Topics

Pedagogy

Digital Literacies

Let's start the week [*updated 7/20/2020*] by repeating that a summer of planning for better online learning this Fall will be wasted if we do not begin from the premise that our students are learning from a place of dislocation, anxiety, uncertainty, awareness of social injustice, anger, and trauma. So are we.

This is the single essential that must be built into the structure, assignments, thinking about what and how we will teach online in the Fall. Face to face too. Imagine the classroom of students in face masks sitting six feet apart, one part of the brain focused on school, another distracted with life's realities in 2020: on parents or partners sick or dying,

on anxiety about getting sick next, on racial health disparities, on protests and militia, on soaring death rates across the nation, on no clear path for ending this nightmare, on a crashing economy, on an uncertain future, an uncertain future, an uncertain future . . .

Why start there? Not with Zoom, not with Plexiglass, but with the disruption of our lives in this historical moment? Because education is an excellent way of moving beyond trauma to a place of agency, confidence, control, community, care, activism, and contribution.

Trauma is not an add on. From everything we know about learning, if the trauma is not accounted for (even tacitly), and built into the course design, we fail. Our students fail. None of us needs another failure.

This means thinking about **access in all its dimensions**: technological, intellectual, personal, financial, medical, educational. And affective. And cognitive. Distraction is the single biggest deterrent to learning. Physical and emotional distress are the single biggest causes of distraction we have in life. Period.

It also means thinking about **agency**: acknowledging the problem is not dwelling in it. It is offering students the tools they need to address and maybe solve the problems they (and we) all face. Too often, in the statements by university officials, students are being discussed as if they were crash test dummies not real human beings.

In considering what we assign and how, it means we might, at least as a metaphor, think of the complex of trauma and anxiety as a cognitive burden comparable to a full-time job. We should be building our courses around the reality **our students are carrying an intense emotional workload** (even if they are partying, pretending they are invisible, not caring about their future: don't believe that for a second). **Again, so are we.**

We need to build our courses thinking about the opposite of an emotional burden: **empowerment, agency, community, care.** We need to be designing ways for students to interact with one another and with us. We need to think about meaningful activities beyond the screen that extend the lessons of the course, building in ways students can be co-teachers

as well as co-learners, actively contributing to their own education and empowerment, connecting students across the barriers of courses, institutions, locations. We need to think about what we all can offer one another--curiosity, imagination, knowledge, power--as antidotes to the present disruption, as tools towards building a future.

As educators, we offer ways that help students not just learn content but also how to have a pathway towards accomplishment. We can encourage them not just to learn from us, as experts, but we need to support them in the process of learning *how to become experts*. "Expertise" is excellent tool in the face of uncertainty.

I've learned of someone at Adelphi University who teaches video editing including to several students with cognitive differences. Now, online and sheltered during a time of COVID, he has pivoted so his students are filming what exciting things and ways they see anew in their restricted and socially distanced lives--on walks alone on formerly busy city streets; or talking to grandparents they live with; or video taping the different forms of friendship that blossom on Zoom. They are making interesting films and also they are becoming confident in their own art-making, a powerful tool for coping with the new social distancing constraints of their lives.

I know two political scientists who have challenged students to model fall voting patterns and come up with positive (nonpartisan) ways to get out the vote, despite sheltering. Or safe ways to stand in line at polling places. This gives students agency. In a COVID world, we all need agency.

I know a lit and history prof, Steven Berg at Schoolcraft Community College, who begins his early American culture class with the 1793 Yellow Fever plague in Philadelphia. History helps us understand the present and feel a little more optimistic that there will be a future too.

I know an urban planner who has challenged students to reimagine urban space in the short and long run, from outside seating at entertainment venues to rent control and subsidized housing to redress gross inequities that existed in NYC long before COVID-19.

I know a critical learning theorist (i.e. me) who invited students, after

reading extensively in Indigenous and decolonial pedagogy, to collaboratively write the course "learning outcomes" for remote learning during a global health crisis.

I know a distinguished professor of African American literature, Professor Farah Jasmine Griffin of Columbia, who maintained a sense of community in her large lecture class by asking students to write one or two sentences online in answer to profound questions such as: "What one book from class would you want to take with you? 2. What, if anything, from your old life do you want to leave behind?" [See "Comments" below for all the questions]

And we all know artists and writers and performers putting their own creativity out there online for free. Students as consumers and makers of all the arts provide an ideal antidote to isolation and anxiety. *A little joy is a wonderful "learning outcome" to build into a class design.*

There is almost no field untouched by this COVID-19 pandemic or irrelevant to it. I do not mean we all have to suddenly become trauma therapists. That's dangerous (unless we are trained to that role). And it doesn't mean making every class "about" the pandemic (that would be awful). It means being sensitive to the devastating historical moment in which we are now living and offering students a way forward beyond it.

Before we even think about a syllabus or videos or Zoom, think about what it means to be a student. Now.

First, what defines higher education, more than any other feature, is that it is voluntary. No law forces you to be in school. Your parents may want you to go to college but, if you are over 18, they can't force you. Humans are terrible at voluntary activities that are good for us (our gym is based on a business model of 80% of annual, paid members not showing up after Feb 1).

Add to the difficulty of volunteerism the pressure of trauma, anxiety, illness, economic uncertainty, and dislocation. Think about attending college without the social enhancements that help support students in schools. I predict that, with an abolition of extracurricular activities, even wealthy, elite private residential schools will soon be seeing higher drop out rates, some perhaps even comparable to public commuter schools

(where students face such pressures all the time--and now exponentially so).

Before we begin to design our fall syllabus, before we make clever instructional videos, we need to think from a student's point of view. We need to try to understand what it means to be studying for a future you don't know that you will have. No one knows what lies ahead in the best of times. Now, all the predictions seem like some dystopian futuristic novel. Total social breakdown? Total economic collapse? A health emergency in which millions die over the next three or four years? How do you study to prepare for this future? What better, positive alternative visions are there? What better narratives can we make? How does an education, learning, help us tell better stories and make better futures?

What do our students need now? That is the essential question for going on line. Whether teaching algebraic geometry or sociology or literature or art or religion, we need to begin with the question of: what would I need if I were a student in this historic moment? A great place to start? *Ask them!*

This does not mean more work for beleaguered instructors who are already stressed with every imaginable disruption. In fact, what we know from active learning, is too much preparation, too packed a syllabus, undermines real learning. "Small learning" (James Lang's phrase) is about small tools that empower, not doing all the work all the time and overtime.

Asking that question also tilts the educational process: *What have students already learned that they can share?* Maybe it is a study skill, a focus trick, a way they have discovered meaning amid uncertainty that they can pass on. Perhaps it is "meta reflection" (the single best way to ensure retention and applicability apart from applying, experientially, what we learn): encourage your students to think, talk, communicate with one another, about what they learned in class today or last week and what it meant for them. Online does not mean absence of community; encourage them to form study and discussion groups, to work together when you are not around.

Or, even with videos and other asynchronous learning, reduce some of the homework while adding a component: ask your students to apply

what they learned in class today to some aspect of their life and write a 25 or 50-word "report back" on a course blog or other secure course site on what they did and how it worked out. This is far better for learning than studying for a test. The report-back helps students communicate with others, see their work in school as relevant and meaningful to their disrupted lives, and lends a sense of community when that is exactly what this pandemic has shattered. It helps them realize why they are in school, why it is worth it to make the effort.

Whatever you are feeling and experiencing, it's likely your students are too--and probably in a greater degree. If you, as a professor, are having a hard time concentrating, being productive, think about a student just beginning the way to mastery who suddenly has to stay focused on a field, a subject, that seems utterly tangential to their traumatized lives, at home, with parents, no job, internship canceled, paying tuition for a bunch of idiotic videos, etc etc.

Adjust accordingly. ***We need to be human first, professor second***.

We need to design as humans for humans in a global crisis. We need to design our courses with the awareness of pain, dislocation, uncertainty, and trauma now central to all our lives. And we need to design with the antidotes to these central to the educational experience: pleasure, community, agency, and care.

It's a lot to ask. It is the one and only essential as we design our courses for this disrupted fall.

Beginning by addressing students where they are *now,* in Fall 2020, at this historical moment, means providing a space and structure where they can think powerfully about themselves and the world *beyond* Fall 2020, beyond this plague, beyond trauma. It does what the best education is designed to do: it offers students a tool to help them be stronger in the present and build towards their own and society's better future.

8 comments

You nailed it!

Paul Conway

Cathy, this is a wonderful statement that orients all teaching faculty toward the right way to think about what is and is not going to happen in and beyond the classroom a few short months from now. I shared this post with all of my faculty colleagues, right at the moment this week where we are beginning to focus on what is being referred to as "hybrid resilient teaching." We all get "hybrid." Your post reminds us that "resiliency" means far more than keeping the trains running.

Paul.

👍 229 | 1 year ago   Log in or register to post comments

Good luck, Paul

Cathy Davidson

Thanks, Paul. This has gone viral. I think we all were so deer-in-headlights about going on line and so quickly that we forgot the human part for a while. "Hybrid resilient teaching" is a fascinating term. May we all be resilient!

Thank you so much for writing, Paul.

hastac

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Here's Exactly What I'm Talking About!

Cathy Davidson

This beautiful essay--with its log of wonderful and inspiring assignments--is exactly what I mean about responding meaningfully to this pandemic and offering students an education that empowers them to find a better future in its aftermath. Thank you Prof Griffin! https://bostonreview.net/forum/higher-education-age-coronavirus/farah-ja...

Professor Griffin asked her lecture class in "Introduction to African American Literature," once it moved online post-COVID:

"As we pass through this portal, let's think about what we might take to the other side, and what we want to leave behind. One or two sentences per question. No more.

1. What one book from class would you want to take with you?

2. What, if anything, from your old life do you want to leave behind?

3. What do you appreciate that you would like to take with you?

4. What change, if any, would you like to see, and commit to bring about, on the other side?

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Another Brilliant Example of Facing Reality with Agency

Cathy Davidson

https://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=oxe5DhMKtc0&fbclid=IwAR3KDxKXAFC7bsFHLON...

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Feeling Inspired!

karapernicano

Really appreciate this piece! I think you're absolutely right to point out that the Fall still need be approached from the perspective that we are all in crisis and working through the trauma of the times. If all online or whatnot, it's still not a "normal" moment to be taking an online course. Many are still not necessarily choosing this format.

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Good luck!

Cathy Davidson

Thanks for taking the time to write and good luck to you---and us all!

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Important to keep in mind

Ylombana

As a trauma therapist reading this brings me much joy. Educators at all levels would benefit from the use of the trauma lens to understand the realities of their students. Not only is this useful for building a real student-teacher connection because it creates the possibility for students to feel seen and heard but also it can make educators realize ways in which they can replicate the oppression that many

communities experience. The disparities that we are seeing today have been made more visible with the pandemic but we must not forget that they were already there.

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Thanks for writing

Cathy Davidson

Since I'm not a therapist, I tried to make sure my attention was sensitive, not professional. I'm very glad to hear you say this and for your insights. Thanks for taking the time to write.

👍 73 | 8 months ago   Log in or register to post comments