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Organizing Class Time and Covid-19
A reflection on pandemic/post-pandemic teaching

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Article abstract

Since 1997, I have been teaching in the Cegep system and at the university level. I have taught at four different institutions, five if one considers my teaching-assistant work as a graduate student. I have seen significant changes in student engagement and the classroom itself. The pandemic threw us all into a strange vortex where I had the chance to revamp my teaching, to modernize it, and to learn. In short, I learned how to restructure my courses and classroom time. My discoveries are captured here, in this personal essay.

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Organizing Class Time and Covid-19

A reflection on pandemic/post-pandemic teaching

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Since 1997, I have been teaching in the Cegep system and at the university level. I have taught at four different institutions, five if one considers my teaching-assistant work as a graduate student. I have seen significant changes in student engagement and the classroom itself. The pandemic threw us all into a strange vortex where I had the chance to revamp my teaching, to modernize it, and to learn. In short, I learned how to restructure my courses and classroom time. My discoveries are captured here, in this personal essay.

We have all been talking about the shifting realities of the classroom since the pandemic hit. When schools closed in March of 2020, all of us, young, old, and somewhere in between, found ourselves forced into a technological reality where we had to teach, in varying capacities, virtually. Recorded lectures made me feel like Princess Leia's hologram message to Obi Wan Kenobi in the first Star Wars (1977) ; so-called asynchronous activities students could do at any time between classes that asked for their direct presence (synchronous—yes, I find these terms strange and not user-friendly), came up for discussion. What worked ? What doesn't work and why ? Which databases could facilitate our attempts at modernizing education ? What happens when our databases crash ? The latter question happens extensively at the Cegep level. We were plagued with many very real questions and often failing or faltering technology.

The most important area that I would like to deal with addresses the return to in person learning and managing classroom time: *how on earth do we manage our classes and reach course requirements amidst serious student anxiety and all kinds of new technology ?*

From Cegep to university, students aren't used to sitting still. They have legitimate anxiety and PTSD from being locked down when they weren't old enough to truly understand what was happening nor willing to become prisoners in their parents' home. From 17-22, how many of us wanted to be home all the time ? Most of us were not: we were at school, had part-time jobs, our friends, and our romances. Our students have been robbed of a serious chunk of developmental time and this robbery has affected how we need to re-create or modernize our courses. Our students are having a difficult time and will for at least another few years. We need to be able to figure out ways to organize our courses and class time without compromising our own professionalism and burning out. My responses include boundaries, definitions, and resources as well as a re-thinking of tangible class time and what it might mean right now in a personalized, introductory format.

Professionalism:

Class time when given open handedly can become group therapy. Many students need to vent about what they have experienced, obstacles with studying and absorbing course material, and being able to meet course requirements for evaluation.

Try not to give group therapy too much time: arrive early and let students vent so you can start on time. If they do offer criticism on something that concerns your class, like e-modules or power point slides, take notes and do your best. However, create a serious boundary between the personal and the professional. Dismiss early in case students do need to vent or talk more. Know the reality between an issue that requires wellness services and one you can handle: like listening or assisting with course related work.

I have noticed, along with my colleagues, an upsurge in student animosity and related aggression. Especially at the university where students pay tuition, students have a series of expectations that often cannot be met given the realities of a given course. Students are very quick to judge and assess what they refer to as presentation. For example, accountability is big right now—as they would say. If a course is post-colonial in focus, students expect a professor who has a related legacy or lived experience ; if a course is in Afro-American or Canadian studies, the professor is presumed to be black or mixed-race. I have heard students complain about having white presenting faculty teaching non-white materials. Content is up for dibs too with politically minded students: a queer film, for example, that features straight actors is not well-received. New feeds that aren't credible often form student ideologies and these can be equally problematic. Students, because they have been deprived of socializing, can come to class, and want to vent or discuss the ideas outlined above. These nuances, and there are many more, cause serious fractures in how the student arrives in any given course. Ripples like this can be felt and are understood currently as micro-aggressions. They can cause classroom question and answer time to move into heated debates among students, making the professor feel uncomfortable. Steering classroom discussion away from rants or side-topics, especially heated or sensitive ones, takes skill and patience. Be prepared for these kinds of discrepancies.

Classroom time would be seriously challenged if we were to attempt to mitigate the kinds of obstacles outlined above. A detailed syllabus with a class list of what you need to get through, either posted for the students or in your notes, will help you work through the kinds of problems that some students can bring to a class. By drawing attention to where you need to go to, you can, with some poise, get the classroom discussion to focus back on the materials and not other often not related ideas.

The Database:

Your school database is your friend. Whatever your database might be, you have the ability to post resources for students. This helps to organize your class time knowing that even if you don't get through your lesson plan with the detail you wanted, you have resources that can get you through. Resources that work include easy clicks to links or documents that are user-friendly. Here is a list of some that I use: E-modules and power point slides, biography/history screenings, and versions of a given text in performance (film adaptation or dramatic reading or theatrical production). Library links and article resources are exceptionally helpful for students when needed, especially at the university level. See what your school has to offer and attempt to provide such resources.

Keep an E-Module or power point slide presentation for each module in your course. I don't teach with these on *nap time*. The student should be, ideally, engaged with note taking and question asking. However, knowing that electronic modules or power points are uploaded beforehand helps the student feel at ease, and the student can understand that there are professor-initiated class notes.

Pre-recorded lectures are useful. If this is your style and you have the time, short parts of a given class can be pre-recorded for students who learn better this way. These are time consuming but many of us have them from the pandemic lockdown. They do help and they do work, acknowledged by students. You can also record as you lecture, in part, but many of us find this invasive and often the technology in certain situations won't allow us to do so. Sometimes there are privacy laws in place as well that hinder this—be aware of what your school allows.

Class notes aside: use a writing program and keep your media center opened during class time. Use it as you would a white board/smart board. Copy and paste each class's notes to announcements or another kind of easy access file for your students using the database the school provides. My students like this and appreciate it. This kind of easy activity reduces student stress which can lead to student aggression. I would like to state that students are more aggressive because of the pandemic. They have been robbed of time and certainty and their anxiety is very real—aggressive behavior is not and has no place in the classroom. We need to be aware that it can happen, and that we can be prepared to thwart such behavior.

Classroom Etiquette:

The reality of electronics is simply part of the world we live in. I turn off sound from my media center (unless we are screening) when teaching and ask all students to make sure their phones are off as mine is. Remember, many students use their phones for course tools—I know not my ideal, but they do. A student scrolling and reading is most probably a student doing course work. Lots of tapping on the keyboard and facial responses most probably reveals that a student is texting and not focusing. Focusing is much harder right now. Try as best you can to help foster good classroom habits.

Balancing time is important too: in longer classes, closer to two hours or more, have important and appropriate breaks. Giving a ten-minute break in a three-hour class helps no one. Think about time, time to use the washroom or get more water or a caffeinated beverage or food. A break needs to reflect these realities.

A lengthier class is more challenging. In a two-hour class, a lecture/seminar, break, seminar/questions will fly by. In a class of three hours or four, you will need items to break up the class.

1. Writing exercises: for workshops or critical thinking, these work well, and post writing discussions often move the class on. Remember to be precise here. Vague or base-level questions interest no one really and don't help the student.
2. Workshop time: for essays and creative work, have workshops. Ensure that activities are timed well, and lead to a particular task that is part of student evaluation. This will help time move forward and allow students to engage with the work.
3. Screenings: from short to longer, or partial, screening time works wonders. With films, for example, avoid screening the whole film in one shot. Have an introduction, a first screening, and discussion/questions, a remaining screening to finish things up, and more question/discussion time. This can bleed over into another class so do monitor time well: don't overstuff your syllabus.

Syllabus planning:

The planning of a course will set the tempo. In short, what you outline on your syllabus will dictate how you will end up using class time. Trying to do too much will result in time lost, not enough time, and stress for you and your students. Do your best to have supplements to your course's primary materials and make sure that the student has time to go through the materials and resources as needed.

En bref

Au moment où la pandémie est survenue, un nouveau discours est apparu, soit celui des réalités changeantes de la salle de classe, notamment par l'utilisation des technologies pour enseigner dans un monde devenu virtuel. Pour l'auteur, les conférences et lesw rencontres enregistrées lui ont fait penser au message holographique de la princesse Leia à Obi Wan Kenobi dans le premier film de la série Star Wars en 1977. Ainsi, tant les activités dites asynchrones où les élèves pouvaient les suivre à leur rythme et les rencontres synchrones qui demandaient leur présence directe ont fait l'objet de discussions. Cette nouvelle réalité a suscité un profond questionnement. Qu'est-ce qui a fonctionné ? Qu'est-ce qui n'a pas fonctionné et quelles en sont les raisons ? Quels paramètres pourraient être utilisés afin d'ancrer l'éducation dans ces nouvelles réalités ? Est-il possible que ces tentatives d'actualisation nous engagent sur de fausses routes ? Que se passe-t-il lorsque nos bases de données tombent en panne ? Cette question et d'autres se posent notamment au niveau collégial, où les acteurs ont été confrontés à de nombreuses questions en utilisant un environnement technologique parfois déficient et peu fiable.

For example, if you are asking students to read a critical essay, especially one on a sensitive subject, and then read a chapter from a textbook or a novel or part of it or a play or watch a film or theatrical piece, this may be a lot to do in one class. Times have changed. At the university level, in a two-hour class one novel or play would be studied over two classes. In a longer class, the depth of a film or theatrical piece would depend on giving it one week or two. By being a little more frugal with what you ask your students to read, or screen, you have more time to work with the material. You also remove stress for them and for you. A film once taught in one longer class would need a class and half. Give your syllabus and weekly break-downs room to breathe, so you can breathe, and your students can breathe as well. This breathing room will help to create a more functional classroom.

Concluding thoughts:

There are no magic recipes as we work through the realities of what we have experienced since 2020. What I've outlined above does help. The more easily accessed links for resources I use during class time and outside class time help my students understand the material better. I know this via the quality of their formal work. Their work signals to me what I have done well or what I need to work on. The more kinds of resources I have for students, the better their work is. This is something pandemic taught me. The pandemic reminded me each student learns a little differently. And I thereby asked myself what I could do to foster this learning reality.

Be open to student suggestion: they might have some helpful tips for you—I promise. When it comes to technology, you might end up learning far more than you thought possible from your students.

Be very diligent on the rise of student aggression and inappropriate behavior. Shut it down gently, move on precisely, and document any unfortunate incident for your union and/or chairperson. We need something for faculty dealing with this. A kind of antagonistic behavior is on the rise on university campuses and starting at Cegeps as well. My students have explained that this comes from approaching the real world like a social media post. I am still trying to figure out exactly what that means, but I think it means that anything we do or say, like a syllabus, a reading, or way to understand, becomes like a post where anyone can comment/challenge/cancel-out what one might be trying to work with. This is frustrating and new. From what I understand, unions and colleagues are trying to work with this new classroom temperature—or the potential for a heated classroom temperature.

The students are our goal: by helping our students mitigate these strange times we can give them tools to understand what they are studying at a far deeper level and succeed. We can also teach them how to interact with other students and faculty. By managing class time well, by reinforcing class activities from actual class time through our school databases, by making sure students have back-up resources for missed classes or classes where they did not focus enough, we pave a path for them to succeed. This is my top priority. The expense should never be my own sanity, and clear, healthy boundaries and a well-organized course are a good start.