

Re-learning how to teach

by Arnav Gupta

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020, there have been countless changes to all our lives. From the minor changes such as where we eat, what we do over the weekend, and wearing masks out in public, to more major ones such as people losing their jobs (or at times temporarily losing the ability to perform their jobs), it is safe to say that a wide spectrum of people, regardless of age and occupation have seen their lives change. Teachers and students have also seen several changes in their daily routine. I aim to shed light on some of the challenges that teachers have faced, as well as some of their mechanisms of coping with them. I also present some of my experiences, as an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant here at Purdue. Finally, based on the information I find regarding teachers' experiences, I also evaluate how the concepts of ambitious teaching, rehearsals, and playful learning (as advocated by Dr. Hala Ghousseini and Dr. Elham Kazemi) fit in during the pandemic.

In the article titled, *How Did COVID-19 Change Your Teaching, for Better or Worse? See Teachers' Responses*, the introduction mentions that "Just as school districts' responses during the pandemic have varied widely, so too have teachers'"(Education Week, 2020). This variation can be due to the teachers' own strengths and weaknesses (in relation to being tech-savy, fast learners, etc.) the resources at their disposal (including, but not limited to computers and stable internet connections, video conferencing licenses, etc.) or the feasibility of teaching their class remotely (for instance it is a lot easier to teach computer programming online, compared to a sports or music-related course). Teachers that have previously taught distance learning versions of their courses likely have a much shorter adjustment period, for instance. In the above-mentioned article, when teachers were asked about their experiences while teaching during the pandemic, a wide range of responses were recorded. Below are some notable trends:

- An English teacher from Pennsylvania stated that, "I have become an essentialist. And I've learned that the most important things are still possible with distance learning: reading, writing, discussion, choice, authenticity, and creativity," (Education Week, 2020).
 - This perhaps indicates that, while the students in her class are not really missing out on the essential learning outcomes of this course, they might not be able to experience everything that a traditional, in-person class would have.
- A Special Education teacher from Virginia mentioned that, "Having the students move away from a physical class where I am there to teach and answer questions immediately and where I could read the body language and facial expressions of my students takes away from my effectiveness as a teacher, relationship building," (Education Week, 2020).
 - This shows an important adaptation that teachers have had to make, and it perhaps makes it more difficult for them to achieve a personal touch when delivering content.

- A 9th grade science teacher from Rhode Island had a more positive response. She believes that, “The shift to remote learning has changed me as a teacher. I can wholeheartedly say that the change has been, and will be, for the better,”(Education Week, 2020). She further stated that, “This shift has required me to use innovation and creativity for the most critical assessments while highlighting the importance of the teacher-student relationship,” (Education Week 2020).
 - This demonstrates that, for many teachers, the pandemic served as an opportunity to switch things up and design courses in ways that they perhaps had not before this.

Since more than a few teachers mention that they found it harder to connect with students and build a strong student-teacher relationship, it would be interesting to see how Dr. Ghouseini and Dr. Kazemi’s teaching philosophy could be applied. Rehearsals, are environments where teachers simulate the experience of teaching a concept to a classroom, by alternating between the roles of teachers and students, and reflecting on any challenging situations that they encounter (as well as planning for situations that they believe they will encounter). The pandemic brings a new set of challenges that teachers and students will encounter. For this reason, the rehearsals also likely need to be such that they account for this changed method of content delivery (be it online, hybrid, or socially-distanced in person) and try and devise solutions to both- the problems they encounter, as well as those they think they could encounter. Playful learning (the incorporation of “play” in the teaching process) would also likely require some tweaking in order to remain effective. Teachers would perhaps have to list-out activities that can and cannot be done in their changed environments, and potentially devise some alternatives in order to replace the critical activities that cannot be done during the pandemic.

Let us consider Dr. Ghouseini’s statement on relationship-building “teaching is more than just delivering content, and involves building relationships with students and their families,” (Purdue Honors, 2021). The above evidence of teachers’ experience suggests that they can still build relationships with students and their families, but it requires much more effort from both parties.

References

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