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Lessons from the pandemic

Cindy Nover

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Recommended Citation

Nover, Cindy, "Lessons from the pandemic" (2021). *Life During COVID: Preserving Personal Pandemic Stories*. 22.

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Name for posting: Cindy Nover

Relationships to EWU: faculty

Your experience during COVID-19:

The pandemic-related campus restrictions started on a Wednesday night right before my students' final exam. An all-campus email went out at 5pm that said that our school was limiting on-campus classes and my exam that night was at 6pm in person, on paper. I knew the students would receive that campus email and be unsure (or some would be in transit to class and wouldn't receive the email at all), so I sent a class message telling students to please proceed to class and I'd be there for the in-person exam. Both messages also went to the other section of the class (Thursday night's class), although I told the second section that the exam was now going to be online. The disparity between the two class' experiences was obvious and I ended up making the exam pass/fail. As this was a mental health diagnosis class and students were eager to demonstrate they knew how to properly diagnose and select treatments, many were dismayed that the exam was pass/fail. To address this, I wrote lengthy comments on each student paper—not something I would normally do, since most students aren't interested in coming to pick up their final exams in a course.

Spring break was the following week and we were given an extra week to develop our spring classes, which would now be fully online. I taught 3 classes in spring and had to figure out how to put all content online and decide if there would be any synchronous portions of class. Best practices at the time suggested that synchronous, Zoom-based classes put students without the proper hardware, software and internet capabilities at a disadvantage. Starting a new class without a chance for students to get to know me and each other in real time seemed to me like it would put everyone at a disadvantage. I settled on having students record and post introduction videos and meeting for 3 small-group synchronous sessions lasting under 2 hours, with each group getting to select the best time slot to meet their needs. I also informed all students that I would be giving timeslot preference to students who could not access the internet or a quiet space regularly.

Following spring quarter, the university released the results of a student survey that indicated that students prefer synchronous classes and struggle more when they don't have regular access to instructors. For my summer course, I therefore scheduled 1 synchronous hour of class each week (down from the typical 4 hours of face-to-face class per week), with office hours for the remaining 3 hours. These synchronous hours are only worth 1 point out of a total of 10 points per week for the attendance grade. The remaining 9 points are earned through discussion boards and other assignments. Even if students were unable to attend the live class, the loss of points was insignificant and able to be made up. I also recorded class and posted it. This course is still in progress and, so far, no one has missed a synchronous class.

From the beginning of this crisis, messages received from the university could be categorized as retention and compassion: "Help us keep our students" and "be more forgiving than usual." I have historically not been known for promoting either of these, specifically. Of course, I want my students to stay enrolled in our program, but, as a social work educator, I do not shy away from challenging students and even helping them identify alternative majors if appropriate. My assignments are tough and my expectations are clear. Students who do the work will succeed, while others will get low or failing grades commensurate with their performance. Since the pandemic began, I have changed how I look at all

students and I have started wearing my social work hat more than my educator hat. Now, I assume that every student is experiencing any trauma I can imagine that might result from the pandemic—job loss, electricity or internet outages, lack of childcare, sharing a house with many people, isolation, relocation, sick relatives and friends and personal illness. Interacting synchronously or asynchronously with students under these circumstances has made me significantly more compassionate. I find myself impressed with students who even try to do the work or come to class and my grading has been much more global, as I'm basically just trying to determine if students got the gist of the content. I don't know that my standards have dropped, exactly, but my methods for evaluation and student opportunities for success have increased. My availability to students during regular office hours and just generally, now that I'm always home, has created stronger relationships than I had in face-to-face classes and I can give more tailored feedback to students. I will definitely be continuing to use some of these strategies for connecting with students post-pandemic.

Beyond my general approach to educating students in the pandemic, my online teaching techniques have improved significantly. I had time to attend 7 workshops about online teaching and employ some templates that my university provided to improve the look of my courses in our learning management software. These templates were already available to faculty but I never took the time to learn about them or to improve the online portions of my courses prior to the pandemic. I now know how to record and edit lectures and make content more accessible to all learners through universal design. Considering that I live in a region where class is sometimes canceled due to weather, having recorded lectures that I can use in future classes and the skills to record and post them at short notice will be invaluable to my courses once I return to the traditional classroom environment.

One thing I learned the hard way is that planning an entire 10-week course before the course starts can be difficult with an online format. Beyond just the syllabus and weekly plan, the actual content of the course must be created before the week that students are learning it. All educators accidentally find themselves only a week or two ahead of their students at times, but the online format is unusually unforgiving in those circumstances. I was pleased with myself when I had recorded lectures for the first 3 weeks of class and posted them, along with the other module content, before class even started. I figured I would record weeks 4-10 over the next couple of weeks and post them when they were complete. Best practices in online education include only opening weekly content for a specific period of time and then closing it so students are at the same pace. I thought I would prove to be a good online teacher if I recorded and posted weeks 4-6 and closed weeks 1-3 and so on, until the end of the quarter. As it turns out, it's really hard to remember what students have already learned from lectures and readings and what they still have coming up. Wearing the same outfit and recording different weekly lectures at the same time further blurs categories so I didn't even have the associated images that normally accompany a lecture on a given topic. I found myself saying, "I know we've talked about social justice several times already..." and then wondering if we had ever talked about it and/or if I was referring to content from a week the students hadn't even gotten to yet. My greatest fear was that if I watched all my lectures in a row, they would appear out of order and incomplete. When a student recently commented that he is confused in my class and that other students are, too, I immediately assumed that I had set him up for failure and probably didn't provide a clear sequence of classes. Luckily, I could go back and watch all my videos to see if my content was clear. That's a definite advantage of online classes that are recorded, although I wouldn't have needed that strategy if I had just

recorded all of my classes in order before the quarter even started. Next time, I will set aside several adjacent days to record all of my lectures and consider changing clothes between each one.

Surprisingly, the pandemic changed my research agenda, as well. In spring, when I realized that having Zoom-capable home internet would be a necessity, I thought of students who live in rural areas (like me) who are literally not able to get fast internet. I wanted to know how marginalized students, specifically, were being impacted by the pandemic. I began to focus on students with disabilities who might be disproportionately disadvantaged by the switch to online learning and the isolation of a closed campus. I was awarded a small grant by my institution to become trained in accessible online learning and to disseminate this information to my faculty colleagues. I also reached out to a friend of mine who works as a paraeducator in K-12 and learned that she had been looking into ways to support high school students with neurodevelopmental disorders who are now having to learn remotely, without the benefit of support staff such as paraeducators. We are now creating content for high school educators and parents who are working with neurodiverse students in high school during the COVID crisis.