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## The Show Must Go On: Challenges, Questions, and Pedagogical Pivots in Response to COVID-19

Patrick S. De Walt

California State University, Fresno, pdewalt@mail.fresnostate.edu

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### Cover Page Footnote

Correspondence to this article should be addressed to Patrick S. De Walt, Department of Liberal Studies, California State University, Fresno, Fresno, CA 93740, United States Email: [pdewalt@csufresno.edu](mailto:pdewalt@csufresno.edu)

## **The Show Must Go On: Challenges, Questions, and Pedagogical Pivots in Response to COVID-19**

*Patrick S. De Walt*  
*California State University, Fresno*

In an effort to do our part to limit the spread of COVID-19, and per direction from the CSU Office of the Chancellor, effective Friday morning, March 20, most campus offices that are not essential to direct student support ... will transition to working remotely, while virtual instruction continues. However, ... we will implement several changes to campus operations tomorrow, Wednesday, March 18, in an effort to ensure social distancing techniques are effectively implemented. (Bell, 2020)

The university, as guided by the Office of the Chancellor, presented an initial response for the students, staff, and faculty within the California State University (CSU) system on how we would proceed with the Spring 2020 semester. This process was no easy task for a system “of 23 campuses across the state of California” with an enrollment of “approximately 485,550 students from diverse backgrounds” and employing “nearly 56,000 devoted staff and talented faculty” (The California State University, n.d.).

As was the case for many educators across the CSU, March 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> represented a critical period that challenged us personally and professionally. A collective concern, anxiety, and uncertainty manifested as information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic was slowly disseminated both by the university/system and nationally through various forms of media. Educators faced the dilemma of wanting to teach yet wanting to be safe from the effects of the unknown, COVID-19. As

educators, we wanted to teach, but we did not want to die.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight aspects of my experiences teaching and learning in six sections of my Social Science through Universal Access (SSUA) course during three semesters of such an unprecedented time. As an educator who feels competent in using educational technology, I did not anticipate many harsh realities. However, I believe most teachers seek to make the best of whatever situation and set of circumstances they encounter because the show must go on.

### **What Did I Do and How Did I Do It: Pre-March 20, 2020**

Prior to the CSU announcement in response to COVID-19, working with Liberal Studies students who were studying to become teachers was a semester-long journey that was often rewarding yet also challenging. My students and I experienced many highs and lows throughout each semester that I taught my SSUA three-hour course. Students were immersed in various activities to encourage problem solving and to apply history-social science content in the form of project-based/problem-based approach in lesson plan development (De Walt & Barker, 2020). The majority of students in this course could be considered to be first-generation or nontraditional (e.g., older than typical age, part-time, working full time while enrolled, having dependents, or being a single parent; see National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Working with students from these and other diverse backgrounds remains one of the most gratifying aspects of the profession. Yet, this work did not come without its own sets of difficulties and dilemmas.

One challenge, even before COVID-19, was the varying levels of student comfort and proficiency with the use of technology

for educational purposes. Many of my students had smartphones, tablets, or computers yet were not what many consider as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001, 2011). In recognition of these factors, I spent my time at the university working with and challenging my students with learning experiences that were designed to enhance their critical thinking skills, use of technology, and development of dispositions. My goal for the course was to expose students to learning opportunities based on the integration of social justice in education (Hackman, 2005), culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) and universal design for learning (UDL; CAST, 2018). Although all of these concepts were extremely important to me as an educator and course designer, the events that were to unfold forced me to revisit every aspect of my course and to make very difficult decisions.

### What Did I Do and How Did I Do It? Post March 20, 2020

After the March 20th announcement, the transition to a virtual learning environment during the Spring 2020 semester put the majority of the campus on hold. We, the faculty, had the opportunity to get assistance through our school technology support services. This transition was not as difficult for me due to my familiarity with the learning management system (LMS), Canvas. I structured the course to function as a flipped classroom (Lo & Hew, 2017) using UDL principles. Bergmann and Sams (2007) describe a flipped classroom as “that which is traditionally done in class is now done at home, and that which is traditionally done as homework is completed in class” (p. 13). For me, the major difference was not having a chance to guide my students through their initial use of certain digital applications as I would have done during

face-to-face (F2F) sessions. However, I did not expect that this process of virtual learning would continue into the Spring 2021 semester.

### *Adapting a F2F Vision With a Virtual Replicant: When the Outcome Differed From the Vision*

Table 1 illustrates the semesters, course sections, and student demographics I taught that were directly impacted during the pandemic. Over the three semesters, I worked with 124 students, with 107 of them being female and 17 of them being male. While racial, ethnic, or linguistic diversity was not captured here, approximately 57% of all my students during this time were Hispanic. Thirty-seven percent of all my students were White, and 6% were Asian. Another important aspect to consider was that approximately 77% of my students would be classified as nontraditional. My students demonstrated different needs and strengths within each semester. As the semesters continued and as my student numbers increased, the amount of preparation and care intensified for me as an instructor and course designer.

**Table 1**

*Section Offerings and Student Breakdown by Semester, Number, and Gender*

Select Demographic Information	Spring 2021		Fall 2020		Spring 2020		Total Number of Students
	Section 1	Section 2	Section 1	Section 2	Section 1	Section 2	
Total Number of Students	26	24	22	23	17	12	124
Gender							
Female	22 (85%)	20 (83%)	20 (91%)	20 (87%)	15 (88%)	10 (83%)	107 (86%)
Male	4 (15%)	4 (17%)	2 (9%)	3 (13%)	2 (12%)	2 (17%)	17 (14%)
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Asian	1 (4%)	2 (8%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	3 (18%)	0 (0%)	7 (6%)
Approximation by % of Nontraditional Students	75%	80%	70%	80%	75%	80%	77%

Although I always have structured my SSUA course to function under principles of UDL and a flipped classroom, many instances still presented themselves “that convey[ed] the challenge[s] and possible success[es] we had in getting our students to actualize their abilities as critical thinkers,

become owners of their learning, and develop more confidence as future educators" (De Walt & Barker, 2020, p. 35). Although I knew that I really enjoyed the F2F aspect of teaching, I did not grasp how much my F2F teaching supplemented my students' online experiences. My ability to read the room, through observation, was a major asset of F2F when gauging students' thinking about a given topic or during a structured activity. Thus, one of the aspects that I enjoyed most about teaching was often least feasible in the virtual classroom. Student nonverbal cues were essential for my formative assessment of student engagement.

The structure of the virtual learning environment when compared to our F2F sessions was challenging. For example, using breakout rooms in my virtual classroom provided mixed results. Breakout rooms afforded more targeted support for students via small groups but prevented supplemental opportunities for students who were not within the group from gaining insight as silent observers. Using pedagogical practices that aided in making abstract concepts more concrete was one of the best parts of teaching. Yet, it was one of the most difficult things to accomplish when teaching F2F, let alone in a virtual setting.

Strategies that were effective in the traditional F2F classroom setting did not transfer well in the virtual setting. When I organized my students into small groups, I offered oral feedback and engaged in constructive conversations while other groups listened and then applied what they heard to their own lessons as needed. As a result of COVID-19 and the incorporation of Zoom, especially during the use of breakout rooms, many of those cooperative learning opportunities that occurred during F2F were prevented or limited. Limitations due to virtual instruction made me question aspects foundational to my teaching, my integrity

and attentiveness to the needs of my students.

### ***Balancing Assignment Integrity With the Reality of a Pandemic***

As COVID-19's continued impact took its toll on the university community and, in particular, my students, balancing this reality with my course expectations created conflicts. Since the SSUA course's inception, during Spring 2016, intellectual integrity has been a major point of contention in terms of how I designed and delivered aspects of the course. Juggling accountability and professionalism while still being mindful and attentive to the needs of students was often difficult. In the semesters during and since the CSU's March announcement, I had students who either experienced the loss of a loved one or a person that they knew. Coupling those feelings with the inherent anxieties from the course caused me to reevaluate how to accomplish course structures, accommodations, and deadlines without compromising expectations. Nonetheless, professional integrity remained foremost in my thinking.

Merriam Webster (n.d.) defines *integrity* as a "firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values." When thinking about the role that integrity plays in teaching, look no further than the responsibilities of those who are teacher educators. As such, we are asked to provide our students with content rich learning experiences that build and nurture them into highly qualified teachers as outlined by the U.S. Department of Education (2004). These responsibilities have made this goal more difficult while teaching within a pandemic.

I have found myself asking if the content really mattered during different periods of time. Concerns of just "going through the motions" and even the potential

of socially promoting my students due to the financial and social complexities resulting from the pandemic were tests on my integrity as an educator. From a moral and ethical standpoint, can a student fail during trying times like these? How much scaffolding should I do when the goal was to get students to problem solve and continue to develop as independent learners? When was a student's response an excuse or a pressing reality?

Over the years, these were questions I have asked myself when challenges presented themselves, yet this felt different and became harder to determine. Many of my students have been flooded with new pressures such as joblessness, loss, technological anxiety, and specific to California, the recent wildfires. Meanwhile, the most noticeable pressure still remained, their grade concerns and acceptance into the teacher education program.

For instance, I had one student whose neighbor died from COVID-19 related causes, and the student was now worried if she had been infected. Prior to this event, her performance was strong based on attendance, class participation, and completion of assignments. As could be expected, our focus shifted as my student and I awaited the scheduling and results from the COVID-19 test. Another of my students also contracted COVID-19 along with her child. Considering all of the COVID-19 related deaths and complications across the nation and within California, it was hard not to think the worst while hoping for the best anytime a person was diagnosed with the virus. This was a very difficult time. Still, I had to keep the class on track while waiting for their test results. Realizing how little I could do to help my students was disheartening. Fortunately, all of my students have since recovered with no known lingering effects.

Instances such as these did help put life into perspective. Yet, I still was reminded of our ultimate goals as teacher educators: to develop critical thinking, socially aware, and content sound future teachers. In order to achieve these goals, teacher educators covered an extensive amount of material that often required us to also address entirely new content.

In response to my students' circumstances, I, like many other educators during the pandemic, attempted to balance the integrity of the course while meeting the pressing needs of my students. We met during office hours and made the necessary adjustments but with the understanding that some of what was designed through F2F engagement would be lost because it could not be duplicated virtually. As the days and weeks within the semesters continued, I found there were additional factors making teaching more and more difficult.

### ***Bandwidth Barriers, Black Screens, External Distractions, and Learner Anxieties***

Virtually teaching class sizes that ranged from 12 to 26 students via Zoom for roughly three hours presented several challenges to my ability to instruct effectively within such an environment. Constraints such as bandwidth issues, black screens, external distractions, technological challenges, and learner anxieties were areas of continued concern for me. Nothing was more frustrating than getting into the heart of the lesson and having the session dropped or experiencing a lag between me and my students, disrupting lesson continuity.

Teaching and learning remain dependent on gaining momentum that occurs through relationship building and connecting the content to your students' funds of knowledge (González & Moll, 2007). Those moments energized my

teaching; however, attempts to show consideration for my students who wished to keep their cameras off had the opposite impact. Losing my ability to analyze their nonverbal and verbal responses when informally assessing them has been a huge concession. My students' reasons varied but included concerns about showing their living environment to others and others' perceptions of them. It also became common for a student's home life to make a "cameo" appearance in our classroom if a sibling, significant other, or child demanded a student's attention. At these times, I attempted to acknowledge the family member and put the student at ease through humor and remind them of my own household "cameos."

Much has been written on Zoom fatigue (Nadler, 2020; Strassman, 2020). The amount of screen time has negatively impacted some of my students' engagement unless they were put into small group activities. Pre-COVID-19, many of my students had little experience with certain types of digital applications (e.g., Smore, Screencast-o-matic, and even Bitmoji). Thus, combining these new applications with Zoom created a type of sensory overload.

Before realizing this, I simply shifted class F2F meetings to Zoom. That was a huge mistake and a teachable moment for me. I was too worried about getting the content across to my students through teacher-student interactions and not solely embedding recordings of me within the LMS. I incorrectly wanted to make sure that they had access to me and thought that I was providing them with consistency and maintaining a routine. I naively thought that preserving our entire course time each week was a good thing for them without considering the amount of screen time that they were spending not only for my class and their other classes, but also for many of

them, the screen time with their children or other family members. Fortunately, through conversations with other faculty and my students, I made much needed adjustments to how much time we spent on Zoom during our designated class time.

As time went on, I changed from solely synchronous meetings to a blend of both synchronous and asynchronous meetings. Synchronous meetings lasted the entire scheduled time, or most of it, but occurred about five to 10 times out of a possible 15-week semester. The asynchronous meetings were condensed to 20- to 30-minute meetings that were dispersed over the course of the week and resembled student-teacher conferences within a K-12 classroom. Finding that balance was again necessary because I did not want my students to feel alone and unsupported. I wanted to reduce any anxieties that they had outside of those experiences that coincide with learning and cognitive dissonance.

I had to make additional adjustments because I could no longer physically meet for the necessary amount of time to facilitate the number of 20- to 30-minute meetings each day that were required and to also meet my other teaching, faculty, and familial obligations. My own family often reminded me of the amount of time I spent on the computer, and I got their message. I scaled back the video conferencing to meet with three small groups at a time during a 50-minute meeting that occurred within officially scheduled meeting times. This change was a huge win for not only my students but also for me. We were able to recreate those interactive moments when students could listen and learn from each other through our discussions about their lessons. They could see and hear what others were doing and thinking in terms of the content, as well. Students expressed how much they enjoyed these meetings, but, pedagogically, I knew that this did not occur

within a vacuum. They needed those individual experiences within a smaller group to make these meetings more effective and efficient.

### **The Compounding Outcome: Going From F2F to Virtual, Same Idea, Three Times the Work and Time**

The creation of a virtual replicant of those student-teacher exchanges has proven to be more difficult to create within the same amount of time and effort. The course design and my pedagogical practices inherently produced challenges for my students even before the pandemic, so a significant investment of time, energy, and thought was required in order to provide a virtual learning experience that was comparable. The planning process for a nearly three-hour F2F meeting necessitated that I prepared resources for students to interact with and coordinate them with activities that helped facilitate the learning process. Even when considering UDL and flipping the classroom, a key element of my teaching still was not captured.

I have grown to view teaching like playing chess. I have to anticipate future moves (concerns, questions, and/or struggles) of my students as I teach within the construction of the LMS. Yet how does one do this while preserving their pedagogical practices of structured improvisation? DeZutter (2011) offers one perspective on how teaching and improvisation, when coupled with constructivism, allow the teacher to “respond to evolving student thinking, which requires constant in-the-moment decision making and the flexibility to teach without rigid adherence to a predetermined plan” (p. 31). Even with the implementation of what DeZutter articulates alongside the UDL guidelines of multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and

expression, the improvisation that occurs within F2F has to be replaced by a structured improvisation. Although DeZutter’s perspective on improvisation was discussed within the teaching of dance, I see structured improvisation as an extension of what UDL initiates.

Structured improvisation is an adaptive and fluid process of teaching within a virtual environment in which the instructor has to construct many possible activities that allow the educator to shift the digital environment to respond to their students within one or two clicks. Although elements of UDL are present, structured improvisation enacts the anticipatory nature of chess by having several moves in place or at your disposal in response to your opponent.

As an educator, I do not see my students as opponents, but I do see that I have to respond to their strengths and weaknesses within pre-crafted virtual activities that replace my natural adaptations for students when teaching F2F. Yet, doing this adds even more planning time in order to create the digital activities that may or may not be used based on the organic responses of my students during the primarily planned digital activities. During the fall semester of 2020, not having the full ability to improvise wore on me and my need to be creative.

Things that we did in the F2F environment included group activities that promoted cooperative learning and student engagement that organically occurred as students were seated in circular tables while accessing whiteboards. I fostered student conversations to introduce content that required lots of planning and thought. Shifting from a F2F format to a virtual one required not only continued planning and thought, but also additional requirements. Structured activities that were simple to implement became time consuming. For instance, leading small groups activities in a F2F class only took about 30 minutes, but in



a virtual space it took an additional 10 to 15 minutes to allow for transitions between breakout sessions, navigating tabs, and bandwidth concerns. Although my course was close to three hours, time was a premium, and the transition between ideas and concepts taught as well as the additional content needed increased time considerably.

### **Lessons Learned: There is More**

Although the last several months have been difficult for students and educators alike, with many questions still remaining unanswered, there still were important lessons that educators can build upon. Over the course of these experiences, I have been reminded of how resilient students remained. Although many have expressed how difficult it has been for them, many still entered the space engaged and curious. Because K-12 teachers were also teaching via Zoom or some other platform (i.e., Microsoft Teams or Google Classroom) during this pandemic, what I had my students doing was more relevant and did not require as much student buy-in.

Another lesson learned was how offering more flexibility in different facets of my course would still allow me to achieve aspects of the vision I had for my students. Several of my students functioned as mediators and/or knowledge brokers for others within the course. By enacting these roles, these students were able to demonstrate ownership of their learning through their application of the content and strategies.

Though some positive lessons have been learned, there have also been those that were negative. Many of my students still channeled residual effects of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (No Child Left Behind, 2002). As a result, they did not have those “moments when students take a chance in an endeavor regardless of their

answer or action being right or wrong” (De Walt & Barker, 2021, p. 13). As these lessons reaffirmed themselves, aspects of their learning were significantly impacted while others were somewhat similar to the F2F experience. The harsh reality of students being socialized in ways that deter their willingness and abilities to engage in critical thinking and self-regulated learning were formidable obstacles in the learning process. For students who demonstrated these tendencies, I often viewed them from a perspective of experiencing what I call “intellectual malnutrition.” In short, this occurs when learners have experienced learning in which their intellectual selves have not received the proper nourishment to stimulate their growth and development. The nourishment comes from a variety of sources that include schools, their families, and the communities in which they belong.

### **Conclusion**

The events resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have shown the importance of educators developing adaptive practices to support not only their students but also to sustain themselves. Throughout my experiences since March 18, 2020, I was continuously reminded that improvisation was an important aspect of an educator’s pedagogical practices. Within a virtual environment, UDL offers important frames of reference but relies on the educator’s sense and ability to adapt and connect the content and students’ cultures and funds of knowledge.

In order to do that virtually, educators must adopt a practice of structured improvisation to decrease the transition time, between accessing different digital platforms, that occurs within many digital environments with the implementation of structured improvisation.

Educators must rededicate themselves not only to mastering the content, which Hackman (2005) articulates as one of the five essential elements of social justice education, but also to mastering the types of pedagogy that facilitate that content.

Finally, educators must develop a mastery of the educational technology that they use. Educators need to maximize the features of their university's LMS beyond just serving as a repository of articles, activities, and a means of responding to their students. Each item that they use should have a clear purpose that aligns with their objectives for the module or assignment.

Doing these things will serve as a conduit for the learning taking place within their virtual environments. Within these practices, teachers and their content knowledge are recentered into the learning process, whether taking a student-centered or teacher-centered approach within a virtual environment.

The responses to such an unprecedented event such as COVID-19 has shown some of the inabilities of this current iteration of higher educational policies and practices. In many ways, higher education is adapting to the market instead of driving it in terms of educating students. While it is important for educators and institutions alike to meet our students where they are, we must also realize that many of our students' educational experiences have been a huge disservice to them. As a result, students have experienced intellectual malnutrition due to the adverse impacts that educational policies such as NCLB still have on not only current students, but also many of the educators who are working within K-12 (Berliner, 2011). As De Walt and Barker (2021) state, "Today's K-20 schools are still grappling with mutations of these concerns centered on educational policy, student populations and who teaches them, and the influences on the content guiding instruction" (p. 2). What

the pandemic has emphatically shown is the need for challenging our students to be critical thinkers and problem solvers, thereby empowering them to be self-reliant and intellectually nourished.

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## Appendix

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