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Cura Personalis: Institutionalizing Compassion during Emergency Remote Teaching

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Abstract: Faced with the fears and anxieties brought on by the COVID-19 crisis, educational institutions had to devise new compassion-based teaching and learning policies and approaches that recognized and provided for the pandemic's psychological and emotional toll. This paper describes how the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines enacted its core value of *cura personalis*, care for the entire person, in the context of emergency remote teaching. We describe the circumstances that prompted the greater emphasis on compassion and the adjustments to classroom management, course content, class interactions, and assessment. Finally we describe the tradeoffs or costs of this approach.

Keywords: Compassion-based teaching, COVID-19, cura personalis, emergency remote teaching, teaching and learning practices, higher education

1. Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 virus in early 2020 forced schools, colleges and universities worldwide to convert face-to-face courses to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to continue serving the educational needs of approximately 1.5 billion students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020). ERT refers to the temporary shift of instructional modality from a face-to-face or blended mode to an alternate mode such as mobile learning, radio or other methods that are contextually feasible. ERT must be distinguished from online learning, which is "a form of distance education in which a course or a program is intentionally designed in advance to be delivered fully online." (Bates, 2020). In online learning, teaching and learning methods are designed to maximize the affordances of the instructional mode. In contrast, ERT is not planned; rather, it is characterized by rapid response, adjustment, and accommodation to the extent possible. Research studies on ERT experiences of the higher education sector with COVID-19 have ranged from comparisons between national initiatives for academic continuity (Coutts et al., 2020), to the documentation of administrative and faculty responses to ERT (Johnson et al., 2020), the management of inequities and student needs (Baker, 2020), and short- and long-term implications for academic institutions (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2020). These studies affirm that due to the massive disruption in higher education arising from COVID-19, ERT was a universal response to ensure academic continuity. In its simplest form, ERT meant powering through what remained of the curriculum. However, during that time, students were experiencing tremendous strain: some needed to vacate their on-campus accommodations on short notice; others had increased family or financial responsibilities; and many were distressed about their health and safety (Bozkurt et al, 2020). In the Philippines, many underprivileged learners did not have access to digital devices and the Internet, and Internet cafes were closed, making access to online classes difficult, if not impossible. Educational institutions had to revisit their priorities and devise new compassion-based policies that recognized and provided for the pandemic's psychological and emotional toll. Schools could not treat students as "cognitive machines" (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Instead, a pedagogy of care, one that was always needed and had always existed, had to become more visible and more palpable during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Ateneo De Manila University (ADMU) in the Philippines was no exception. It shifted to ERT from March 16 till May 8, 2020. While doing so, it enacted one of its core values, *cura personalis*, care for the entire person, to arrive at a pedagogy that prioritized compassion. Compassion is defined as the recognition of the suffering of others and the decision to take action to alleviate that suffering

(Gelles et al., 2020). It has four main components: an awareness of the suffering (cognitive), a sympathetic concern (affective), a desire to relieve the suffering (intentional), and a readiness to help relieve the suffering (motivational). Other studies regard compassion as a three-part process involving noticing another's pain, feeling for the other's pain, and acting in response to the pain (Frost et al., 2006). Based on this framework, institutional compassion is said to exist when members of a system collectively notice, feel and respond to pain experienced by members (Kanov et al., 2004). Focusing on institutional responses to suffering among its members allows us to understand how collective proactive, creative, and empathetic actions help bind organizations. In this paper, we attempt to describe how, as an institution, ADMU enacted compassion during its ERT. We answer three main questions: (1) What were the circumstances that motivated the emphasis on compassion? (2) What specific teaching and learning practices enacted this emphasis on compassion? (3) What were the tradeoffs or costs?

2. Methodology

The data reported in this paper was collected as part of a multi-institutional and multinational study that examined faculty, student, and administrative responses to ERT when COVID-19 first emerged in early 2020 (Bartolic et al., 2021). This paper's methods stem from that study. We focus on data collected from the Ateneo de Manila's Loyola Schools, a tertiary education institution that offers undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The Loyola Schools are headed by a Vice-President and divided into five schools headed by Deans: the School of Humanities, School of Social Sciences, School of Science and Engineering, the John Gokongwei School of Management and the Gokongwei Brothers School of Education and Learning Design. The Loyola Schools have approximately 10,000 students at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

2.1 Participants, Research Instruments, and Procedures

Five departments were pre-selected to represent samples of the university's disciplines: Computer Science, History, Psychology, Political Science, and Chemistry. Since the departments had unequal sizes, the Yamane formula was used to determine the percentage of courses and faculty that would form the sample of each department. Using the percentage generated by the formula, courses, names of faculty, and students were then randomly selected using MS Excel. The final number of faculty and students was 112 and 1032 respectively. From these, an actual total of 45 faculty members and 321 students agreed to participate in the study. Nineteen (19; 42%) faculty members had been teaching at ADMU for at least ten years; in contrast, twenty-six (26; 58%) had taught at the university for ten years or less. Twenty-seven faculty respondents (60%) had not taught an online course prior to the ERT period, while ten members (22%) stated they had previous experience with remote teaching. On the other hand, survey results were received from 108 first year students (34%), 123 second year students (38%), 56 third year students (17%) and thirty-four students in either their last year or in graduate study (11%). The common thread binding all participants was that each was part of an active course during the academic term in which the abrupt shift to ERT occurred.

  Two data collection instruments were devised. The first was a virtual, semi-structured interview with faculty. This consisted of 70 core questions about one specific course that was taught during the ERT term. It included questions about course details before and after the transition to ERT in terms of classroom management, content delivery, interaction, and assessment. On average, the interviews lasted about 30 minutes to 1 hour per instructor. The second instrument was a web-based self-administered questionnaire on the same course which instructors completed prior to the interview. This sought their general feedback on the emergency transition to remote learning. A similar web-based self-administered questionnaire was given to student participants.

  Each of the 112 course instructors and 1032 students was sent an email invitation to participate. Initial low student response rates resulted in the resending of the invitation to the entire student population of those taking courses offered by the aforesaid departments during the Second Semester of School Year 2019-2020. The invitation contained a statement about informed consent, as well as YES and NO buttons to indicate participation. A total of 45 faculty members and 321 students agreed to participate. This automatically recorded their email addresses and provided them a link to the

self-administered questionnaire. It also notified the research team to send the faculty member an online interview invitation. Once scheduled, the researchers met the course instructor to record the virtual interview. All interviews were then transcribed; all but three interviews had been recorded. The responses from both the interviews and the student and faculty questionnaires were then summarized through frequency counts to answer the research questions. These were corroborated with data from faculty interviews and open-ended student questions. The researchers assumed that all faculty responses were honest and that the questions were answered to the best of the participants' ability.

2.2 Limitations

Due to the COVID-19 situation, data was collected using online forms and virtual interviews, which meant that the lack of any extralinguistic and non-verbal cues normally available in face-to-face settings may have affected the richness of the data (Hewson, 2015). Moreover, because of the relatively small sample of students, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the entire student population. Finally, the study aimed at retrieving general faculty and student experiences during the pivot to remote teaching; it does not compare experiences across year levels, disciplines and departments.

3. Results

Compassion on an institutional level can emerge when members of that institution first notice that pain is experienced by others (Kanov et al., 2004). This involves awareness of others' emotional states, and being attentive to emotional cues and experiences in one's context (Frost et al., 2006). The global pandemic meant that many individuals simultaneously felt anxious, uncertain, and devastated by the drastic changes imposed on society. Added to this was the abrupt shift to ERT spurred by the need for academic continuity, which caught both faculty and students off guard. The general feeling of anxiety and pain was observed on an institutional level. We now look at the physical, behavioral and psycho-emotional scenarios which prevailed during that period, prompting the need for compassion.

3.1 What were the Circumstances that Motivated the Emphasis on Compassion?

The interviews with the faculty shed light on some of the circumstances that underscored the need for compassion. The early days of the pandemic cultivated fear and panic. This resulted in a lack of focus and motivation to learn. When asked about their agreement with the statement "I was confident in my students' abilities to learn well in a remote online course", faculty responses were mixed. Twenty-three respondents (51%) agreed with the statement, but twelve (27%) did not. Ten respondents (22%) were neutral. This implies that while half of the faculty initially perceived their students to be capable of successfully transitioning to online learning, the other half did not share their confidence. During that time, the island of Luzon was placed under an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), shutting down travel, business, tourism, and face-to-face education. Faculty may have felt that the ECQ would also have affected students' mental and emotional states, possibly hindering them from a successful transition to online learning. One teacher shared that students "were worried about the pandemic [so] they lost focus, and that translated in their work."

The pandemic indeed gave students problems of their own. When asked about their agreement with the statement "As my instructor transitioned to remote online instruction, I was confident in my abilities to learn well in a remote online course", student responses were mixed. Half disagreed with the statement, 40% agreed, and the rest were neutral. This implied that many were not confident about their abilities to successfully hurdle the pivot to remote learning. Eighty percent felt overwhelmed by the transition, with half of the students believing it took more effort to complete work compared to before the transition. The majority (70%) of the students stated that the pivot to remote teaching resulted in a lower level of engagement ("not being motivated or engaged enough to do the tasks/readings"; "it was more difficult to find the motivation to do the tasks provided to us").

Fifty-two students (16%) stated they were concerned about the loss of motivation amidst the uncertainty and fear ("At that time, everything was hectic and uncertain so I did not feel that academics should be my top priority"). Another problem was technology (7%). Students needed a fast, reliable

Internet connection to participate in online classes, and this was not a universal resource. Beyond this, other student problems ranged from changes in living and working arrangements (14%) ("I do not have my own place to study, so often I am right beside the living room where my family watches TV and [goes] about their day"), to difficulties in self-learning without the benefit of real-time feedback (43%) ("most of the things we had to learn by ourselves"; "not being able to clarify something on the spot"). Students also had to confront a certain degree of loneliness. Without a set schedule and regular, contact with their peers, feelings of isolation started to grow ("it was harder to connect with classmates to collaborate and work together"). Table 1 shows the significant challenges mentioned by students.

Table 1. *Most Significant Challenges of Students during Remote Learning*

Challenges	n	Total (%)
Motivation	52	52 (16 %)
Internet connectivity	23	23 (7%)
Environmental factors	36	46 (14%)
School-life imbalance	10	
Lack of real-time feedback & guidance	68	137 (43%)
Keeping up with the online set-up	25	
Difficult to study on my own	23	
Difficulty in learning the material	21	
Lack of interaction with other students	32	32 (10%)

After the initial shock had worn off, feelings changed. Students had a realization that, "[it] looks like we're going to be [in this situation] for a long, long time." Students therefore started to ask how they would continue studying under the circumstances. In general, the transition to ERT affected students negatively. One teacher said, "Learning went down. I don't think they learned much after the transition and it's not their fault either." However, there were students who continued to flourish. One teacher shared that, "I had some students who were highly driven…they were able to…channel the anxiety and use it for something more productive." These students poured this energy into their work.

3.2 What Specific Teaching and Learning Practices enacted this Emphasis on Compassion?

After pain is noticed, the next two steps in the compassion process are feeling for the other's pain and acting in response to the pain (Frost et al., 2006). On an institutional level, there is a collective feeling for others' pain which involves not just empathizing with others, but going beyond feeling to involve a response to suffering to alleviate the others' condition in some way. In this case, the collective response of the university was to enact compassionate flexibility (Gelles, 2020) in online teaching and learning practices to help students finish the courses as best as they could. These practices are discussed by teaching dimension: classroom management, content delivery, interaction, and assessment.

In terms of classroom management, one of the first things that teachers did was to establish ground rules for the ERT period. Forty-one instructors (91%) gave students written instructions on how to proceed online, and twenty-seven (60%) conducted an online interactive session with students to answer their questions about the. Eighteen faculty members (40%) posted a live streamed video or a YouTube-type video to explain how the course would be conducted remotely.

The ERT necessitated changes in content delivery. Many teachers (31/45, or 69%) defaulted to the use of live lectures conducted over the Internet during scheduled class hours. Three respondents stated they learned how to design more engaging content, and one instructor learned how to create podcasts. Thirty-one instructors (69%) also recorded videos of themselves. One teacher reported that, "I made instructional videos…and then just later uploaded [them] to support the asynchronous learning. [A] big part of my class relied on lab or hands-on activities, so I just uploaded instructional videos on YouTube for students to follow." Some teachers made use of existing content with 35 respondents (78%) saying they made use of teaching materials they found online. The actual amount of content delivered had to be reduced drastically. This will be discussed in greater length in the next section.

Teachers supported class interaction with a range of online communication tools. The most popular were the use of broadcast email to the class (51%), and course announcements on an internet-based bulletin board or learning management system (LMS) (51%). Others conducted

personalized individual communication using email, phone calls, Google Meet or Messenger. A fourth choice was the use of Facebook to post announcements, as well as the use of Discord, and text messaging. Teachers used a variety of avenues to maximize reach to students. On average, they communicated with their students 2-3 times a week. Teachers also took every opportunity to check in on them. These "*kamustahan*" ("how are you?") sessions became a regular part of class. One teacher would ask the class how the situation was affecting them ("...the students loved it because that gave them a semblance of normalcy at that time.") The "*kamustahan*" sessions gave the students and teachers a venue for open listening and empathizing with others, which facilitated the noticing and feeling aspects of compassion. More importantly, these provided a holding space for people to air their concerns and reflections, and where responses to aid healing could be given as the third aspect of compassion.

With regards to assessment, greater leniency was a recurring theme. Teachers did not give deductions for late submissions. Some modified the assignment or project specifications to better suit the online environment. Other teachers whose final projects required the citing of primary sources relaxed that requirement because students had no access to these texts. After three weeks in quarantine, it was becoming clear that both teachers and students were struggling. On 7 April 2020, the Vice-President for the Loyola Schools issued a memo declaring that all students would be given a passing grade for the semester. The memo stated that, "The Loyola Schools is of the mind to pass all eligible students this semester by giving them a P (pass) mark. Giving a P mark is the most humane way of dealing with student grades under the circumstances that we are in, where it is difficult and unfair to make a judgment of failure considering that students have not been given the benefit of a full semester to improve their performance."

3.3 What were the Tradeoffs or Costs?

The shift to ERT forced faculty to revisit their plans for the semester and trim content drastically. One teacher reported that, "I did take away academic topics, particularly…the last few modules that were more contemporary." Experiments that were usually conducted face-to-face had to be removed. Activities that involved oral presentations to a class also had to be withdrawn. One teacher noted that collaboration was difficult to achieve, especially among the freshmen. Discussing through Zoom or Facebook is not the same. "Half the battle for freshmen is getting to know their peers…but with online learning ...there's a lot of anxiety there because now they're not friends with the people they are learning with." One apprehension that teachers had about the reduction of content was the impact this would have on licensure. One Psychology teacher shared that, "If you want to take the licensure exam for psychometricians, you need this course. [Since] we weren't able to cover all the topics... [students] have to catch up [themselves]." One Chemistry teacher echoed the sentiment, "...you cannot get your Chemistry license if you haven't physically had this class to the degree that they dictate. This means that when we go back to school, they have to go back and do the labs because the law says they have to."

While many students and teachers welcomed the decision to give all students a passing grade, many teachers continued to offer learning opportunities at no risk. However, students generally did not take advantage of these. One teacher observed that, prior to the April 7 memo, many students continued to participate in her class discussions. After the memo was issued, very few students persisted because they saw classwork as optional. Major requirements had to be scrapped including final oral presentations, poster presentations, and term papers. Thus, many teachers felt their students received a lower-quality learning experience during ERT compared to the first part of the semester.

4. Conclusion

Beyond the shift from face-to-face to online learning, ERT also marked a shift in educational approach. A pedagogy of care became the order of the day. Within the ADMU in particular, the faculty and administration put a greater emphasis on *cura personalis*, or *respect for all that makes up each individual* (Otto, 2013). This necessary choice was enacted through drastic reductions in content, the use of diverse delivery methods, the use of a range of communication platforms, and greater leniency in assessment. The choice also came with a cost: that of academic rigor. Under the circumstances,

however, the tradeoff was necessary for the public good. When an institution notices uncertainty and anxiety in its members, it needs to feel with its members and respond accordingly. Such moves spring from elements of that institution's culture, values, and beliefs. In the case of the Ateneo, this was elevated to the institutional level and helped its members realize that *cura personalis* was not only care for an individual, but care for everyone.

Acknowledgements

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