Teaching Innovation in Times of a Pandemic

N. Jeff Rogers
University of Kentucky, nelsjrogers@uky.edu

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N. Jeff Rogers

Department of Modern and Classic Languages, Literature & Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
University of Kentucky

Teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic has taught me two lessons about higher education and the pedagogical mission of the university. That these lessons are inextricably intertwined and at times contradictory should come as no surprise. The first thing I learned moving my teaching into the virtual realm was that we, as university educators, have only just begun to scrape the surface with regard to the potential use of digital technologies to enhance innovative teaching and facilitate engaged student learning. Given the right opportunities, real financial support, time, and effective training, we as faculty members can, I believe, enhance the educational experience of our students using innovative strategies that further integrate technology into the teaching process. Just less than a year ago, many of us rarely used Zoom, Google Docs, Jamboard, Flipgrid or many of the other digital tools and platforms that have made teaching in the COVID-19 pandemic possible. We have learned to collaborate online in new ways and reformatted many aspects of our teaching to the new realities of the online, socially distanced, pandemic world. Many of us have learned new ways to connect with our students and facilitate student-student collaboration. And many of us will continue to use the ideas we were forced to develop in 2020 in our future classrooms. But the pandemic has also brought to the fore something most of us in higher education know on some level, even if we

do not always put it consistently into practice. *Education is not information delivery.* We do not want the future leaders of Lexington, Kentucky, the United States, and the world to be data banks full of facts, figures, laws, and equations. We want creative, critical, and *autonomous* thinkers, who can empathize, collaborate, question, and solve problems across platforms, regions, and disciplines. Which leads directly to the second lesson I learned while teaching in the pandemic: interaction is essential. I do not think we can teach empathy, creativity, effective communication, engagement, collaboration, problem solving and new perspectives without being present with and for our students in the classroom. The opportunity for instructors and students to communicate and interact with each other meaningfully is an invaluable component of an effective classroom.

Online education, if in the form of virtual file exchange, cannot replace meaningful interaction and collaboration of students and teachers regardless of what some technology gurus and the proponents of marketplace efficiencies might claim. Do not get me wrong, this does not mean that online courses do not have a role to play in the future of education. They do. But they should always be secondary and supplemental to what goes on between students and teachers regardless of modality. Humans excel at the social, it makes us who we are: the language animal. Interaction, collaboration, and collective action have allowed us to create and control our environment in unprecedented ways (for good and bad). Digital technologies can enhance our ability to empathize, communicate and collaborate, allowing us to maintain social connections across time and space in ways that were not imaginable even a generation ago. But the pandemic has taught me that the digital, like other technologies, *extends*; it does not replace. A teacher who has met with students, who knows them firsthand, has talked to them, and can empathize with them as fellow human beings wrestling with shared problems and challenges, can more effectively facilitate online learning and collaboration than a teacher who only knows students as a face or name on a computer screen. In the same way, a teacher who is present can most effectively help students with different life experiences, whether because of ethnicity, class or gender, learn and succeed. Affect, emotion, empathy, and the connections they build between individuals and groups may play a more significant role in the teaching and learning process than we have imagined. Books (like digital tools) are a wonderful technology for teaching. But they are most effectively used in tandem with a teacher, with someone who has read them before, who will read them with you again and investigate the ideas they contain with you. We do not expect students to simply buy the chemistry textbook and then know the chemistry that is in it. They need a guide. They need practice. And the most effective guide is present, right there with the student and who knows the area, the field, the discipline to be explored. My mostly online COVID-19 semester felt like driving through a town with Google Maps as opposed to a trip through the same town with a local historian, or geographer or biologist seated next to me in the car.

When I am trying to go somewhere, Google maps might get me from point A to point B efficiently, and even tells me where Starbucks or McDonalds is, but it cannot really help me "get to know" the terrain in any meaningful way. It cannot teach me about the local industries in the way a geographer can, or the history of the people who live there like a historian, or the habitat and animals in the area like a biologist. And it surely cannot tell me which door to knock on when I need help (or which door to avoid) in the way that someone from the neighborhood can. And the digital

navigation tool will not point out the giant oak tree in the corner lot the kids in the neighborhood have hung a swing from to gather, play and swap stories. And yet it is precisely the act of pointing out the neighborhood oak and its role in maintaining the fabric of the neighborhood, by someone who knows the terrain and the neighborhood, that may inspire or motivate a student to see trees and habitat, or neighborhoods and regions, or kids and communities from new perspectives. It is experiences like these that make the educational process truly meaningful, and which connect inquiry, knowledge and expertise with the natural, social, and cultural environments. These experiences make information personally relevant to our students as they navigate the terrain around them. If we are lucky, these experiences help our students see the world from different perspectives, motivate them to investigate the world in more detail, and perhaps even ask new and interesting questions that might unlock some of the existing mysteries of the disciplines.

Let us not let the lessons of the pandemic go to waste. Let us engage with those around us, in our classrooms, at the university with a renewed appreciation for the potential each of us brings to the community, for the hidden gifts one might not at first recognize over a computer screen. Let us remember that technology is there to help us stay connected when we cannot be together, that it is there to improve the quality of our lives, it should give us time to be present in our communities, and that we have choices about when and how to implement it in our classrooms. Successful teaching should not be measured by how much we use technology, but how effectively we use it to extend learning and teaching as social activities that take place between people.

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