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My pandemic pedagogy playbook: a glimpse into higher education in the Dutch Zoom-room

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Pandemic pedagogy

Teaching is deeply personal. Just as research is part of my identity, so is teaching. I feel humbled, and privileged, to have the opportunity to teach in the University classroom. I take the role seriously. Like so many of my colleagues, I try to bring concepts to life in my classroom. I rely on the principles of varied repetition, accessibility, and interactivity – alongside a healthy dose of humor – to create a meaningful classroom experience.

I do not know how to do this in Zoom. Or at least, in March 2020, I didn't.

In a near instant, my classroom was sealed shut and a Zoom account appeared in its place. The status of “essential work” meant that University education would continue. But I felt lost. How do I recreate my interactive classroom experience on Zoom? My first attempt was horrible. My Wi-Fi was spotty, students couldn't figure out their webcam settings, mute buttons were equally impossible to find, my lecture felt stilted, non-verbal cues were non-existent, and not a single embedded video in PowerPoint worked. I felt like a failure. I was the director of the Teaching & Learning Centre, and I crashed and burned. How was I going to support my colleagues if I couldn't do this myself?

But sometimes, it's not about the knock down – it is about whether you get up again.

So, I got up again. And again. Like everyone teaching during this pandemic, I just keep trying. Some efforts work, some are better placed in the “what not to do” category. There is no playbook for teaching in a pandemic. All we can do is write our own and share what we learn. In this commentary, I share my playbook – in all of its messy glory.

Step 1. Go back to the drawing board

Digging back into my notes from my very first teaching training course, I came across the phrases “Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence” (ARC). Most readers will be familiar with ARC as these constructs form a core aspect of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Autonomy reflects the needs people have to feel in control of their lives; relatedness reflects the needs people have for belonging and connectedness; and competence

reflects the needs people have to build and develop mastery over tasks that are important to them.

Self-determination theory tells us that our students enter our class (Zoom)-room with an intrinsic motivation for learning. But not all education is fun, and this intrinsic motivation can be difficult to sustain. Here is where pedagogy comes in. If teachers can create an extrinsic environment where students' ARC-needs are supported, students are better able to self-initiate and sustain educational activities (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). The question is: can digital education support ARC? A few months into this live experiment, I find myself believing that it is possible – but, like anything, it will take some time to get this right.

Take first *autonomy*. In reviewing my standard classroom pedagogy, it was clear that autonomy is peppered throughout. The question was: how do I keep this in a digital environment? Similar to the physical classroom, I am able to support autonomy by providing activities that students can (partly) interpret in their own way or carry out at their pace. For example, I continue to allow them to select a reading of their choice from a larger reading list; I allow them to select their own media examples to elucidate the processes of children's media preferences; and I ensure that all details of an assignment are available early so that students can work on assignments in a timing that fits their personal schedule. So far, so good.

Now consider *competence*. I similarly found that competence has indeed been part of my physical classroom experience all along. And, just as I had done in my physical classroom, I use (now digital) class-wide Q&A sessions as an opportunity for *formative feedback* whereby all students can check-in to assess their own knowledge, ask questions, and learn from one another. But I also noticed that, in my physical classroom of 25 students, competence means having the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge in discussion. Normally, I am able to encourage (nearly) all of my students to share their voice. But now, sometimes it feels like the mute button is a hurdle that I cannot defeat. My students have their camera on, which is wonderful, but the willingness to unmute and contribute often feels like an insurmountable barrier. The Zoom digital chat function has helped (with a teaching assistant to monitor it), digital polls are helpful, and breakout rooms can help as they provide a smaller audience. But, still, I worry there are some students who feel less competent in my Zoom-room.

And then there is *relatedness*. In my teaching, relatedness is reflected as both student-teacher connection and student-student connection. Both are so important to achieving the learning goals in my graduate classroom. From the student-teacher side, I *need* this connection to achieve autonomy and competence. In my brick-and-mortar space, students often came up during break or after class to ask questions. I could read their faces when a topic was confusing. I also feel that my informal moments before class helped break down invisible barriers that may have otherwise held back some students. My Zoom-room does not offer these affordances, at least not inherently. So far, I have piloted discussion boards with active response hours (not popular), digital office hours (moderately popular), and small-group digital Q&A sessions (a fan favorite). I have also started keeping my Zoom-room open after lecture for what are now humorously called "After the Show" chats. These have mixed effectiveness depending upon the questions asked (general topics are superior to unique situations). But I'm getting closer.

As for the student-student part of relatedness, I find this an ongoing struggle as my learning goals assume that students will connect. Yes, I can reduce my group assignments

to be more individualized, but personally, I would recommend against that. One of the intangibles of higher education is relatedness. Students learn to connect, work together, debate together, share experiences, vent together, and grow together. With social distance being the phrase du jour, it is perhaps even more imperative for educators to find (safe) ways to help students build, maintain, and sustain connections. So, I have kept my group assignments *with* technology support added; I ensure (extended) time in the breakout rooms and encourage students to take lecture breaks “together”; and I have tried a less-than-perfect Online Pub Quiz at the close of the class that was met with appreciation. None of these efforts are able to replicate the relatedness that forms in the long coffee machine lines on campus, but they help.

Step 2. Re-prepare

As I worked to adjust my content delivery to better support ARC in the digital classroom, I also found that I had to accept some (re)preparation. Years of classes that were (nearly) perfectly prepped no longer worked quite right. My newly designed course was laughable (it included hands-on building of robots in small groups). I had to re-prepare for a digital environment, with little time and even less energy. That meant being strategic about the changes I could implement in my teaching.

First, I reorganized my daily course lessons. I found that it was imperative to take 10-minute breaks after 30-minutes of live lecturing, otherwise I lost attention. This decision continues to be highly appreciated by all of my students. Second, I created documents that spell out the details of any planned in-class group work (previously simply announced in lecture) along with planning ahead my break-out rooms. I built online white boards for students to use (I personally love Padlet), I pre-made polls to facilitate discussion (I use Poll Everywhere), and I ensured that digital course space was clear and self-guiding. I built media viewing lists for pre-class viewing (I use Kaltura) since in-class viewing is a buffering nightmare. I also found that weekly 2-minute welcome videos help guide and anchor my students, and I found that my previously unscheduled interactions with students have to be in my course planning, too. *Fun fact:* I now even plan for a back-up student to handle the Zoom-room in case my internet drops and I end up locked in the Zoom-waiting room upon reentry (again).

It’s been exhausting. I made mistakes and missed things (e.g., the waiting room fiasco). I talk with my fellow superhero teachers often to share ideas and learn from one another. Many of the tips listed above were inspired from these conversations. In fact, I would say sharing with colleagues has been crucial. That’s why, in summer 2020, my colleagues and I released the “Educational Redesign Aid (ERA)”- an open-access online tool (<https://tlc-uva.github.io/educational-redesign-aid/>) for teachers that provides ARC-supported digital variations along with preparation tips such as the ones I listed here. I hope that many of tips on ERA help readers both now and also post-pandemic as we find ways to successfully merge physical lessons with digital opportunities.

Step 3. Accept imperfection

I continue to navigate pandemic pedagogy, but this process has been far from ideal. The world around me weighs heavily as I worry about at-risk family members and friends.

Students and their families have become ill, too. I am emotionally drained. I am tired. I am running as fast as I can just to stay in one place. I know that I'm not alone in this. My colleagues feel this too, particularly those doing the real work of caregiving simultaneously. Working in this pandemic bubble should not be taken lightly. This is not simply working from home. This is being at home, during a pandemic, trying to work.

Pandemic pedagogy has made me take seriously the importance of self-care, and respect for others' self-care. Some days, there is simply no energy left to pre-record another video – the version with the blooper has to stay. And that is okay. Our physical classrooms were never perfect, and our digital ones will not be perfect either. Sensitive, open, reflective of the human experience – that's what I will continue to strive for. Some days I get close. Other days I worry that my best might not be good enough. And on those days, I find myself rereading this email from one of my students:

"I just wanted to thank you for asking us how we are at the beginning of each class. Even if we don't say much, it is nice to know someone cares about us during this uncertain time."

They hear me, even if they don't always unmute. So, I'll keep trying. I'll be imperfect, but I'll keep standing back up. I guess that's the essence of my pedagogy playbook.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jessica Taylor Piotrowski is the Director of the Graduate School of Communication, the co-Director of the Faculty's Teaching & Learning Centre, and the Director of the Center for research on Children, Adolescents, and the Media – all housed at the University of Amsterdam. Her research and teaching focuses on understanding how children and adolescents' approach the digitally mediated world, and how we can best foster a healthy and beneficial experience in this space.

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