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## The Struggle is Real: Reflections on How to Engage Students in the New Normal of Higher Education

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# The Struggle is Real: Reflections on How to Engage Students in the New Normal of Higher Education

Lara Watkins

**T**he pandemic has shaken up our routines, communication, and mental health. Its fingerprint has been left within most, if not all, aspects of our lives from how we talk to friends to how we conduct research and move about in the world. Higher education is clearly no exception. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators have and continue to adapt and innovate into a new normal amidst strains on our mental health. **What do we want higher education to look like?** No matter how we try to mask it, the insidious breath of Covid-19 has shifted enrollment patterns, the way we go about completing our work, and the future of higher

education. However, our mission remains the same: to build a shared learning community that inspires students to think critically about the world around them and propel them forward to think creatively about their actualized future as engaged global citizens.

At a time when many are talking about the future of higher education, one lesson that has been stressed to me in my own courses is the need to listen. Of course, as an anthropologist well versed in the unique perspective provided by engaging in participant observation, this should have come as no surprise to me, but it is a critical lesson that can be easily overlooked with agendas, goals, and limited time. We need to listen to population trends, group interactions, and individual narratives. As an academic advisor in the social sciences through the College of Continuing Studies, I advise a diverse population of post-traditional students. Most are juggling work and family responsibilities. Some are successfully transferring

from a two-year institution and hope to complete their degree as soon as possible to reach their second career goals. Many are returning to school after taking a break and are uncertain about their ability to “do it all.” Many need to slowly whittle away at academic requirements as they seek balance in their lives. They need someone to listen, feel that they have been heard and know what to do next. Each student has a unique narrative for their past, but a shared hope for future academic success and career satisfaction. Their ideal vision for education rarely fits into a full-time, day, brick-and-mortar model. Covid-19 has shifted some traditional students away from this model as well.

As faculty, we cannot ignore the crossroads that Covid has propelled us toward. It continues to impact students (not to mention instructors) daily and, therefore, impacts our classroom interactions. I struggled as to how to address this insidious presence in

my spring 2022 courses. As a trained applied medical anthropologist navigating an onslaught of misinformation and often outright disinformation during a pandemic, I felt the ethical responsibility as a university-based educator to promote discussion, while also steering students toward being critical thinkers regarding the consumption of news. How we assess information in the current technology-based environment is so different from the not-so-distant past. Lateral reading of online information provides greater context for our sources but requires a cultivated critical eye and the intentional avoidance of “rabbit holes.”

In a writing-intensive medical anthropology course (ANTH 230: Culture, Health and Illness) that I taught in spring 2022 as a synchronous online course, it felt imperative in the midst of a pandemic to give students the opportunity to reflect on what they were hearing in the media. Working in pairs or individually, students were tasked with finding, sharing, and reflecting on a news story in their own mediascape related to culture, health, and illness. My original goal was to steer students toward understanding the value of peer-reviewed, scholarly work and how it differs from other forms of information posted on the internet. However, this quickly became a secondary goal. I wondered if students were benefiting from the experience. Were they taking it seriously? Were the non-presenters who had their cameras off “tuning out” because it wasn’t being formally assessed, as I considered it an “experimental” component to the course design? There was no grading rubric and there was no specific assessment of what students prepared. Yet, week after week, I was impressed by the level of student engagement during this portion of the class. Students were constructing and managing our learning community. Some of the greatest student interaction happened during this segment of our class meeting. Students related the news to their own personal lives

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and challenges (challenges that were by no means trivial and were at the crux of culture, health, and illness brought on by existential crises during a time of disruptions and loss). Through verbal feedback and written comments shared in the Zoom chat, students engaged with each other, asking, and answering questions, providing support, and commiserating. Often, I had to conclude conversations because we already ran the full length of our class meeting of over two hours.

Often, I had to practice the skills that I was seeking for my students to cultivate – perspective taking, listening, and a willingness to engage in novel conversations around controversial topics with others with diverse viewpoints. Consequently, I did have to think about how to address misinformation in follow-up classes. While I sometimes felt that conversations were being derailed and key core concepts were being sidelined, this was not the impression that students conveyed to

academically, but in large part due to the layered challenges wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic atop everyday life.

A 2021 Gallup survey found that emotional stress was a key factor in students “stopping out” from taking courses (i.e. not continuously remaining enrolled) with a dramatic increase from 2020 to 2021. As educators, it is often the little things like taking 15 minutes out of a course period to allow students to facilitate a related conversation of interest to them or canceling a whole class meeting to have one-on-one appointments to check in with students that can help with retention. Providing students the opportunity to seek help in an informal manner can “break the ice,” allowing them to feel competent, while being vulnerable.

In a new learning environment that may be geographically remote from a physical campus and one’s peers and instructor, making connections with student-selected materials/topics and each other can make a world of difference. Asking for help can be modeled by instructors and encouraged explicitly as well as implicitly. We are vulnerable; we are learning as we go and that is okay! The pandemic has shifted so much of our world – but I am looking forward to utilizing the best lessons learned – ways to engage post-traditional students in our current learning environment...as well as the curbside pick-up revolution, of course.

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## Each student has a unique narrative for their past, but a shared hope for future academic success and career satisfaction.

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At the end of the semester, students shared that they overwhelmingly appreciated the opportunity to inform the topics discussed each week, while being able to center the conversation on something of relevance to them. I heard from students that they appreciated being able to inform the direction of the course at a time when they were feeling overlooked, silenced, and isolated more broadly. With the university’s vaccine mandate, some students were propelled to enroll in the synchronous online course because they were not vaccinated. However, these feelings directed toward the vaccine were not unique to this pandemic; they have been around since the early distribution and subsequent mandating of Jenner’s smallpox vaccine in the early 1800s (H. Larson 2020). Indeed, this is one of the biggest pushbacks against vaccine mandates – feelings of disempowerment, particularly at a time of crisis. Passing the focus of the discussion over to the students gave them a sense of empowerment.

me. They provided feedback that this was an essential feature of their learning in the class. Reflecting, I attribute this to the importance of promoting emotional engagement in the material. This section of the class helped to promote a learning community and facilitated other conversations in an online course with the potential for students to sign onto Zoom only to mentally check out.

At a time when so many are struggling with mental health, feelings of isolation, and existential crises for themselves and their families and friends, I found it extremely important to give students the time and space to use their emotions in support of their learning in group interactions. As faculty, we engage with students in groups, but also as individuals. Based on the research of Good and Shaw (2022), adults and children avoid seeking out help when it is needed. Seeking aid is interpreted as admitting to less competence. As an academic advisor and professor, some students have conveyed how they are struggling. They are struggling



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