

FIRST PERSON

COVID-19 and the “New” University Reality

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COVID-19 HAS FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED THE WAY WE DO and think about education. This change stretches from K-12 all the way to higher education. Globally, millions of students have been forced into new classrooms comprising a computer screen, a keyboard, and an instructor who seems to be located worlds away. Educators, meanwhile, have had to rethink their pedagogical worldviews and fully embrace the worlds of online and virtual learning spaces. While I am unwilling to definitively speak in the future tense and say this will be the new norm, I am quite comfortable stating in the present continuous, that, for now, this fluid situation is normative.

In March 2020, my university, a designated state Flagship, took the painful but practical decision to move all instruction online. The switch to online modes of learning was, for all intents and purposes, relatively smooth. Moodle had been a mainstay of campus learning technology for at least ten years, and a Moodle platform was automatically generated each semester for every course offered at the university. It was left up to the instructors to decide whether or not Moodle was incorporated into the learning offering. Zoom was also fairly widely used and was oftentimes offered as an external portal attached to Moodle.

So, our transition from face-to-face contact to virtual or online learning was relatively hassle-free, at least in principle. My three courses were designated online at the beginning of spring 2020, and two of the courses had already been offered in a 100% online format for at least three semesters. All I had to do was tweak. Instead of my students taking their exams in our computer-based testing lab, they now wrote papers and emailed them to me via Moodle. Instead of face-to-face office hours, I now met with students via Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, and by phone. While my office hours had always been relatively flexible, in the era of COVID-19 they became extremely fluid. I had student conferences

anywhere from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., and my availability now included Saturdays and Sundays.

I soon discovered that I was spending more time responding to student emails and having virtual student conferences, than before COVID-19. This was an interesting trade-off. I would get out of bed in the mornings, shower, walk to the kitchen to prepare a mug of coffee, gulp down said mug of coffee over the sink, then bring a second mug of coffee to my home office. I would spend the first two hours of the day responding to emails – usually answering questions that could have been answered if students had read my fifteen-page syllabus. I would also use that time to respond to emails from university colleagues, publishers, and everyone else who claimed to want “only/just five minutes” of my time. After emails I would begin my virtual student conferences.

I kept an orange polo shirt next to my desk, and I pretty much used it for almost all of my virtual meetings. But beyond the one shirt lasting an entire semester, reduced dry cleaning bills, the joy of receiving department emails rather than having to attend long and nauseating meetings, not having to worry about campus parking, and being able to conduct business from the privacy, sanctity, and sanity of my own home, the lockdown also highlighted some thought-provoking issues.

Access and Technological Equity

Oftentimes we hear about the technological divide, and we are almost conditioned to associate it with K-12 education. However, personal technological bankruptcy is a harsh reality for thousands of students on many college campuses. There are many college students who do not own computers or have computer and internet access outside of the campus. I, for example, did not own a computer until I became a college professor; I simply could not afford one. I wrote my dissertation on a computer on the first floor of the university’s library. I also did not have home internet access until my second year as part of the professoriate. We sometimes take for granted that technological access is universal and normative, but as the costs associated with higher education approach the stratosphere, students are faced with difficult choices: tuition, food, shelter, versus necessary/required technologies.

When COVID-19 forced us into lockdown, many of our students left the safe and reliable technological space of the campus and went back to their home communities, some fairly rural, with little to no internet access. Some also went

back to urban areas, where, due to poverty or other financial burdens, technological access is simply not a priority. How then do we have a conversation about educational access, technological access, and equal educational opportunity, when a large number of the constituents we serve have neither access nor opportunity?

Often in the USA, this technological divide occurs along racial fault lines, although in the *conversation*, race is omitted and replaced with various constructs of poverty. Let us paint a picture:

- At least 15 per cent of US households with school-aged children lack reliable high-speed internet access.
- Among low-income families, 33 per cent lack internet access at home.¹

For many of us who exist within the confines of the ivory tower, the idea that “there are people out there without internet access” seems unbelievable in the 21st century. After all, our campuses are well wired and well connected; our university libraries can sometimes locate book chapters and journal articles at other libraries hundreds or thousands of miles away, and deliver them to us in a matter of hours; we can email and exchange documents with our not-so-friendly colleagues so as to avoid face-to-face encounters; we can preview books online and order said books from Amazon without ever having to step foot inside a bookstore; we can communicate with friends, relatives and colleagues across the world in real time using myriad communication platforms without having to deal with high telephone bills; we bank; we shop; we date; we self-diagnose medical ailments; and we entertain ourselves, all within the confines of online spaces. Consequently, we sometimes take our virtual/online realities for granted, and we often consider them normative; but what about the rest of society?

Campus, Poverty, and Physical Space

When our campus went completely virtual early in 2020, it forced me to think and reflect critically about my own poverty and accessibility issues when I was a graduate student. What if there had been a pandemic when I was writing my dissertation? Where would I have done my writing? Would I have had computer access? For many students, it is the university campus that provides space, technology, and a sense of normalcy.

Many university libraries double as computer labs and computer access points, and sometimes provide a sense of space that students might not necessarily have

in their regular domestic situations. A few years ago, I remember having a conversation at my university with a student who was a single parent and who shared domestic space with her two young children, her mother, and her boyfriend – all in a cramped two-bedroom apartment. For her, getting a college degree would not only give her a sense of agency, but would also allow her to provide a better life for her children and her family. She relied on the computers in the library to do her assignments, and she relied on the physical library itself to provide a space where she could sit from time to time and read undisturbed while taking a break from her usual “mommy duties.” How would such a student cope during the pandemic? Actually, the correct question is, how are students in similar situations coping during the COVID-19 pandemic? With university libraries closed or operating at reduced capacity, the playing field for students who are already disadvantaged, is now far from level. A closed library or a library with reduced operational functions, is simply unable to serve as a technological equaliser for the students who need it most.

With no clear end in sight, it is imperative that as part of the guild of educators and policy makers that constitute higher education, we think methodically, intentionally, and strategically about our next move(s). Recently, I have begun to think about professional responsibilities and expectations in the era of COVID-19. What is the new norm, and will the current *temporary* expectations transcend and become normative when things get back to normal?

Rethinking Pandemic Learning and Student Interaction

Although my classes were already designated as online delivery at the time that my campus went into lockdown mode, I still felt the need to make curricular adjustments. I had all my course content on Moodle, along with study guides, advising information, links to internships and scholarships, and a link to Lee Ann Womack’s version of “I Hope You Dance,” one of my very favourite motivational songs, that I have included on the final page of all my syllabi for the last couple of years. I had even prewritten emails that Moodle would automatically send out to students at 6 a.m. exactly one week before each test. I had everything perfectly organised before the COVID-19 curveball.

With the campus libraries and computer labs closed, and with the campus off-limits to everyone except designated emergency personnel, my students were now physically all over the place. The classes were offered online, but almost

everyone taking the courses were campus-based students, who saw my online courses as the best options at that particular time. Thinking back about my own poverty-derived technological deficits, it dawned on me that there was the possibility that some of my students might not have adequate technological resources in their new domestic spaces that would allow them to achieve course success.

My first step – a major one for me – was ensuring that my students were able to connect with me regardless of their personal technological access. I took the bold step and offered my cell/home number to all my students. As I was composing the email to students the day the campus closed, I included my cell number, and I thought to myself, “Self, you are going to regret this.” Although I had hesitations and reservations, I knew at my pedagogical core that I was doing the right thing by giving students additional access to my off-campus self.

As an intensely private person, who fiercely guards my non-work time, I worried about this newfound access to my personal space that I had given to students. While I received several phone calls from students, and had lots of fruitful discussions about course content, thankfully none of them took advantage of this new access. They would email or text to set up an appointment; they would text immediately before they called, as I had requested, in order to give me a few minutes to adjust my hearing aids; they almost always asked how much time we had for the conversation; and most surprisingly, they almost always asked about my family, and how I was coping with the lockdown, and if I had the opportunity to get fresh air outdoors from time to time. This was never, ever, the norm!

I explained to my students that although the syllabus was an integral part of the academic contract, I was making a few adjustments in order to ensure their academic success. I changed the testing format to a series of short critical response papers. I eliminated the comprehensive multiple-choice exam, since that exam was usually offered in our now closed computer-based testing lab and needed to be proctored. I found it unconscionable to ask students to pay out of their own pockets for online proctoring services that required their own computers or laptops, strong and reliable internet service, and a stable domestic space. Additionally, I also expanded the deadline window for each assignment, so that the students now had more time to complete their assignments and possibly seek out reliable computer access.

In the past, my colleagues and I have complained bitterly about the quality of writing we received from students, and I had pedagogical concerns about the kind of work I would get from students in a time of crisis. When my students

submitted their first “lockdown” assignment, the quality of writing was beyond my expectations. For the most part, the writing was elegant, thought-provoking, streamlined, fertile, sophisticated, and well cited. Prior to the submission deadline a few students had contacted me asking for permission to exceed the stated page limit because they were “really getting into the material” and needed more space to explore their ideas.

With so many grades falling within the ‘A’ band, I now had to offer explanations to my Department Chair and some others high up on the food chain, as to why the grade profile of my students had skyrocketed. How did I go from the instructor who awarded very few grades within the ‘A’ band – the instructor who was often described as a hybrid of Miranda Priestly, Violet (the Dowager Countess of Grantham), Maurice Phipps (Laurence Fishburne’s character from *Higher Learning*), and Maxine Waters – to being the instructor who was seemingly “giving away” ‘A’s?

It seemed that even though my academic and grading standards remained high, the students, whether due to boredom, restlessness, too much time on their hands, or a fear of the unknown, immersed themselves into the course material and developed a level of intimacy with intellectual concepts and ideas that I had not seen in twenty years. Not surprisingly, those grades represented the highest cumulative course grades I had ever given, and at the same time, my spring 2020 teaching evaluations were the best I had ever received, only recently topped by the fall 2020 evaluations. I wondered, but certainly not aloud, if higher education was on to something *new* and great.

Supporting Students in the Age of COVID-19

There is a delicate balance between our reliance on technology and the educational products that we offer, provide, and peddle. In December 2020 I transitioned into a new role at my university, where my new focus is now advising and academic advising policy. While I still teach, my substantive role now falls under the umbrella of student support services.

In the past, when my substantive role was primarily a member of the pedagogical workforce, students would drop by my faculty office for advising and to discuss course matters. Often, there would be a line outside my office stretching into the corridor. I’ve had students with appointments who waited up to fifty minutes beyond their scheduled appointment time to see me, especially during

peak times such as registration, mid-terms, and near graduation. When I would finally get to see a student who had been waiting for fifty minutes, I would apologise to that student, knowing that they had a visual frame of reference for the delay. They were in the line waiting, and though impatient and exasperated, they saw first-hand why there was a fifty-minute delay: there were several students in front of them, and I, being a conscientious instructor/advisor, was trying to solve as many issues as possible in one visit. That student, perhaps prone to hyperbole, might then construct a narrative about a line stretching around the building, along with a three-hour wait. At least the hyperbolic line stretching around the building, which over time would become “stretching all the way to the state line,” explained the long wait. That kind of hyperbole was perhaps a win-win for both of us: the students waited in line so maybe, just maybe, I was offering good advice.

Now that I have a new role and my advising has migrated online, there are no face-to-face appointments and there are no lines, so students do not see other students waiting; everything is done via technology. A student who sends me an email with a course-related question, or a question related to graduation requirements, expects a response almost immediately. Such a student has no visual frame of reference for the delay. They do not see long lines; they do not see my inbox with 150 unanswered emails from other students containing questions that are just as important as theirs. While this was an issue prior to the great migration of education to online modalities, COVID-19 has certainly made the situation even more dire.

My students and advisees who previously viewed face-to-face education in terms of a “nine-to-five” arrangement, now see my role as someone who is expected to respond to their emails within ten minutes, even at 2 a.m.! Recently, a student sent me an email at 4:27 p.m. on a Friday evening, three minutes before the office’s scheduled closing time. There were twenty-three emails ahead of that student’s email and I addressed thirteen of those emails before shutting down my computer and leaving the office at approximately 7:21 p.m. I returned to the office the following Monday to find a complaint from the student: I was non-responsive to her emails. The student’s one email suddenly became “several emails” and the time between her writing of the email at 4:27 p.m. on Friday and Monday morning – approximately sixty hours (including Saturday and Sunday) – suddenly became “several weeks.” Did I experience similar situations prior to COVID-19? Yes! Has it become worse since COVID-19? Absolutely!

Back in the days of face-to-face encounters with students, I had clearly stated office hours, even though I had no objection to students dropping by my office without appointments. I actually looked forward to those unscheduled meetings with students as they often served as pedagogical sounding boards for my teaching and research. In the era of Zoom however, I find my office hours becoming way more fluid. The thought of reserving Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to meet with students, has been replaced with the expectation that I should be readily available and accessible to students *most* of the time. This is not practical; a balance has to be found, taking into consideration the present pandemic circumstances, the social and pedagogical needs of students, as well as the professional, research, and personal responsibilities of faculty and staff.

These days, whenever I meet with students via Zoom, I begin with icebreakers. I ask how they are doing, I talk about the weather (my very favourite subject to talk about in Louisiana), and since I play Helen Reddy's version of "Delta Dawn"² in my office several times per day, the students will invariably ask about the music in the background; perhaps shocked that a Black man from Jamaica is humming to a Country and Western song as he straightens his papers for a Zoom meeting. There is a level of intentionality in asking my students how they are doing as we banter before getting to the academic business at hand. A few times a week I walk from my office near the football stadium to the food court inside the Student Union on the other side of campus. I visit the same food establishment each time and I order the same salad on every visit. The most important element of my visit is interacting with the three ladies who make my salad, all of whom I know by name. Hearing, "How are you today dear?" "Did you walk up those steps, you seem out of breath?" "You need to drive from your side of the campus to here; it's a long walk!" "The weather needs to make up her mind!" are some of the things that truly make my day. Additionally, my salad is always larger than everyone else's. I operate on the assumption that since I appreciate and look forward to my "squad" from the food court asking me about my day before taking my order (the exact same order every day), my students might also appreciate what we in Louisiana call acts of Southern kindness.

By asking students how they are doing, I am able to glean information that might require me to put certain academic interventions in place or position myself to become an advocate for that student while concurrently addressing their degree completion path. It also provides me with a fairly accurate idea of some of the challenges that our students face as they sojourn through the pandemic.

Empathy and a smile have become tangible gifts we can offer to each other when the road ahead seems unclear.

Preparing for the New Reality

As I try to strike a balance between advising and scholarly responsibilities on a university campus, I am usually up late at night trying to keep up with my writing and research. A few times I have responded to emails at 2 a.m. when I needed to take a mental break from writing about the intellectual complexities of nineteenth century American Literature. While I do this of my own accord, simply because I like addressing emails as soon as they come my way; this should never be viewed as an expectation or a norm. I ended up having to put an end to this practice of responding to emails in the wee hours of the morning because a few times after responding to a 2 a.m. email, I immediately received two more emails from the same student(s) within minutes, with the expectation that I would respond right away.

Students sometimes do not remember or realise that those of us who teach and provide support services for them on university campuses are also human, and that our lives are not always axial to the campus. A few years ago I was picking up groceries, and as I was moving from aisle to aisle in the supermarket, one of my students was walking behind me and using his cell phone to record what I had in my shopping cart. I turned around and caught him and when I asked him why he was so interested in the contents of my shopping cart, he simply said, “I did not expect to see you in a supermarket.” Clearly, this student was under the impression that I did not eat or do things that *ordinary* people do. He obviously thought that all I did was sit in a room and read books and grade papers when I was not teaching. He somehow thought that my entire life, my entire being, belonged to the university. In an era of technological connectedness where instantaneous responses are becoming normative, how do we as instructors and student support personnel impart to our students, the virtue of patience? How do we compartmentalise our campus lives from our personal lives?

COVID-19 forced me to step up my technological game, and the pandemic itself has highlighted my technological deficits. Occasionally, some students try to capitalise on these deficits. Not too long ago, a student, who probably thought I was technologically daft, sent me an email stating that he had completed a test via Moodle Quiz, but somehow he was not seeing a grade for that test, and the

missing grade was causing him *great* anxiety. He went on to state that at the end of the test, Moodle indicated that he had earned a C on the test. That made it almost believable, since someone with a “missing” grade who did not actually *do* the test, would probably claim that they had earned at least a B. The student went so far as to send me an email thanking me for being a “cool and understanding professor.”

With a swollen head from being called a “cool professor,” I sent a response telling the student that I saw no record of him taking the test, but that I would ask Information Technology to see if they could locate the missing test. The student responded by asking if he would be allowed to retake the test if his “missing” test/grade was not found. I proceeded to tell the student that Moodle archived everything on its platform for at least a few years and if the test was done, Information Technology would locate it in a matter of minutes. I apologised to the student for the missing grade and the anxiety it was causing him, and I even promised to walk in the rain to the Information Technology office to help the IT experts locate his test. Although I suspected that this student was having somewhat of a free and easy relationship with the truth, I gave him the benefit of the doubt and I contacted the Information Technology office. My initial hope was that the student would see the names of the higher-ups who were copied on the email and he would quickly redirect and say something like, “I made a mistake; it was another test that I took, not yours.” That never happened. An hour or so later, IT responded and informed me that there was no evidence that the test was taken. I quickly emailed the student and with the news from IT, and I pointed out that with all the technology around us, resulting in technological confusion, he probably took a test for another course and mistakenly thought he was taking my test. I then offered to have a Zoom meeting with him to discuss options for improving his course grade.

I eventually had a Zoom meeting with the student, and as I contemplated asking in a very pastoral way if there was anything he needed to tell me, he blurted out, and said something like, “I did not do the test. I lied. And I know that you know that I lied. I got way too deep into the lie and I could not escape it.” He then went on to tell me that he did not realise that I was so tech savvy. The fact is, Moodle is able to make someone like myself who still writes handwritten letters, and who writes everything in longhand before transferring it to the computer, look tech savvy and sophisticated.

I was able to have a rather honest and truthful conversation with the student.

Like so many of us dealing with pandemic fatigue, he simply felt overwhelmed. I, too, have felt overwhelmed. The student felt guilty for being overwhelmed. He had no financial burdens, he had a stable domestic situation, and he had been successful in outrunning COVID. Yet, the normative uncertainty engendered in him sudden and frequent moments of vulnerability. Looking at that student via Zoom, I felt like I was staring into a mirror. I had identical feelings and similar moments of angst. Our meeting made me realise that at times, rehabilitation trumps retribution, and that the act of listening allows you to walk a mile in someone’s shoes. As I made peace with the situation and gave the student a second chance, since the idea of the university is often marketed as a place for second chances, I confessed to the student that his initial hunch was correct; I am actually not tech savvy. He responded, “I kind of figured; I’ve heard you say, ‘*the Moodle*’ on several occasions.” I simply smiled. When I lived in Atlanta, anyone who referred to the city’s transit system as “*the MARTA*” instead of simply “MARTA,” was obviously from out of town. Who would have thought that the use of the definite article could end up being a cultural and technological signifier?

These days, whenever I have conversations with colleagues, I usually articulate my concern about the tensions between new professional expectations and *the* “new” university reality. For students who started college in August 2019, this new virtual collegiate reality is mostly all they know; but for the students who started in August 2020, *this is their only collegiate reality*. I often ask if we will ever return to normal, or if the present reality has already morphed into the new normal. Will the college campus and the college experience as we once knew it, ever be the same, *or*, was the university as we previously knew it, actually NOT normal, but we are simply conditioned to relegate to normalcy, anything we have done repeatedly at least three times?

As we all look forward to a post-pandemic life, I reflect on what has been my parting gift to students for the last several years. All my online Moodle syllabi usually end with lines from the song, “I Hope You Dance” by Lee Ann Womack³. This song has kept me going, and kept me hopeful, and kept me sane, even in the worst of times:

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder,
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger,
May you never take one single breath for granted
God forbid love ever leave you empty handed
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean,

Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens,
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance.

I hope you dance . . . I hope you dance . . .

I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance,
Never settle for the path of least resistance . . .

In the sea of uncertainty surrounding higher education, I have taken my cue from Lee Ann Womack and I have chosen to dance. I have also chosen patience, and I have chosen to offer a listening ear whenever there is talk of change. I have opted for an enlightened approach. I remind myself that the idea of the university is one of enlightenment; a purveyor of enlightenment that concurrently serves as a symbol of society's enlightenment.⁴ Perhaps a by-product of the pandemic is a re-examination of the role of the university in the 21st century and a realisation that eventually, *we* will need to change how we go about the business of education. While I am sometimes resistant to change because I am stubborn and set in my ways – the oxymoronic pleasant mild-mannered curmudgeon of sorts – I am well aware that change is a necessary part of growth. The pandemic has forced me to come to terms with my own biases about online learning. My perceptions have changed. Online learning can be just as rigorous as the face-to-face classroom and should be viewed as part of the larger project of democratising the ivory tower. Online learning is also affordable learning, and affordable learning is a critical part of the accessibility project. Accessibility democratises education. Beyond that, I have begun to take the enlightened approach that the higher education landscape is much like language, not stagnant, not static, but very dynamic and always evolving and giving birth to itself.

Notes

1. Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin, "Nearly One-in-Five Teens Can't Always Finish Homework Because of the Digital Divide." Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018.
2. Helen Reddy, "Delta Dawn." *The Woman I Am: The Definitive Collection*. Capitol, 2006. CD.
3. Lee Ann Womack, "I Hope You Dance." *I Hope You Dance*. MCA Nashville, 2000. CD.
4. Shridath Ramphal, "Vivat, Floreat, Crescat: UWI 40th Anniversary Convocation Address." *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 3, September 1989, pp. 41–49, 66–67.