

Toward an Empathic Model of Online Education

Paul A. Crutcher

March 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic promoted K–12 and higher education institutions in North America to abruptly transition curricula to online and hybrid formats. As the literature notes, schools discussed digital distance learning programs long before this particular moment in the spring semester. Yet the poignant lesson from the transition had little to do with platforms or particular technologies, tech savvy or lud-dite. Instead, we witnessed challenges fundamental to digital distance learning—philosophical and practical questions about the staggering loss of the affective components of teaching and learning. The

digital, online teacher subjects herself to levels of scrutiny unparalleled in the analog classrooms of 30 years ago. That teacher also engages an educational space that largely disengages the deeply human aspects of interaction—emotional intelligence, empathy, *affect*.

The pandemic prompted some teachers to reconsider the profession, as did a colleague of mine. He lamented finishing his decades-long career as a professor *outside* of the classroom, unable to see and talk with students or colleagues. Known for sitting at a campus coffee shop every morning, open to drop-ins from students about anything, the university's decision to transition all courses online gutted him. We heard from students who planned to take a term off, to quit or transfer if fall courses would stay online. What aspect(s) of teaching and learning created such saddened and negative reactions?

The pandemic also prompted teachers to more poignantly than ever see the affective elements of teaching. As teachers became burdened with work and social restrictions, health precautions, potential economic loss, childcare and other unexpected responsibilities, they (i.e., we) found parallel experiences with students. Status markers faltered as the “professor” related to the “sophomore” as a fellow human being. I not only found empathy with my students, but swelled with compassion for many of them, especially those in direct forms of healthcare. Might the online transition during the pandemic not spark fruitful discussion about how online



Paul A. Crutcher,

Associate Professor of English and Director of Undergraduate English Education, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, English Department SH501-H, 2801 S. University Avenue, Little Rock AR, 72204. Telephone: (501) 569-3161. Email: pacrutcher@ualr.edu

education can best capture that aspect, noted above?

The United States saw issues in the spring with parents and students refusing AMI work, school administrators and teachers struggling to address assessment, problems with major testing (e.g., SAT/ACT) and college entrance, teachers and faculty retiring, college students choosing not to continue or a “gap” term, and much more. These covid/corona pandemic issues were exacerbated by contentious politics and the Black Lives Matter protests. While the incongruent Black Lives Matter movement is traced to Trayvon Martin in 2013, it exploded in May 2020 with George Floyd. The confluence of these points we see as universities and K–12 schools return for the fall. Politics, whether an anti-imposition stance against masks or wearing masks with political messaging, infused the return. November elections push these points of contention into classrooms, and those in online schooling are often in an increased closed loop with their families and those politics. Contentious, toxic, oppressive—again, what profound challenges to thinking about affect, about empathy and compassion.

In an update to *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, Nel Noddings addresses the increased pressure to standardize education by advocating for “a responsive system” that would allow student choice. Her investment in the student, in the experience of the student, and in care for the student is echoed in many other approaches to “school.” As parents and guardians are faced with—more than ever—imagining themselves as teachers, it’s worth looking at the teaching paradigms that center on the student and often leverage digital tools for inquiry projects. Consider the “anthroposophy” of Waldorf schools or those related in the Montessori and Reggio Emilia/Malaguzzi traditions. Daniel Pink’s or Nikhil Goyal’s dismantling of school conventions in *Drive* and *Schools on Trial* (respectively), like the Dewey-inspired

Foxfire schools of Appalachian Georgia, Farenga and “unschooling” in *Teach Your Own*, or Dale Stephens and UnCollege. Or Tara Westover’s popular memoir *Educated*. There is promise for increasing attentiveness, care, and empathy for the student by noting what works there and in programs like edX, the user-produced DIY youtube network, and the polished masterclass.

if we wonder about the above strategies at caring for students and tapping into their curiosity, what more might we do to increase empathy and compassion in our online courses? Contemporary educational research is rich with gestures toward empathy. See Mary Cowhey’s *Black Ants and Buddhists*, for instance, or Jackie Seidel and David Jardine’s *Ecological Pedagogy, Buddhist Pedagogy, Hermeneutic Pedagogy*. While many scholars remark on the fundamental tenet of how empathy and compassion emerge from the recognition in Buddhist philosophy in the shared experience of suffering, we would do well to understand empathy rooted in us and not part of an exotic other. To this end, consider B Alan Wallace’s excellent *Mind in the Balance*, Austen Ivereigh’s insightful *Wounded Shepherd*, or Douglas Abrams, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama’s wonderful *The Book of Joy*. As Joseph Campbell writes, the song of the universe can be seen through the parallel teachings and practices in Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, and other traditions. Teachers can turn away from binary polarization and political conflict through recognizing these truths. To be sure, for every polemic and social media battle today, if the canonical gospels and sacred philosophies fail, we can turn to Mia Salavitz and Bruce Perry’s *Born for Love*, Emily Bazelon’s *Sticks and Stones*, Arthur Caramicoli’s *The Power of Empathy*, Dev Patnaik’s *Wired to Care*, Dacher Keltner’s *Born to be Good*, and many others.

What to do, then? Allow me to offer humble guidance through anonymous student notes in recent course evaluations of

two online university courses I taught. Such embodies phenomenological and reflective approaches to educational theory and research. First, responding certainly to handling of the massive upheaval in the spring 2020 term, one student wrote:

The most effective aspect of the course was the instructor's willingness to adapt to the changes in today's world. He was very accommodating with due dates and making sure that all of the things that could hold a student back were not challenges.

Recall Nel Noddings' and others' focus on the student, on being flexible and "responsive" to the student and the world. As much as possible, then, it seems teachers ought to build into their online courses as much flexibility and autonomy as possible for students.

Second, note how this other student explains what s/he found most important in *learning* for the mythology course:

This course gives the student a lot of autonomy. So much of my education has been spent writing about things that aren't related to my life, so it's hard to really get a true feel for what you're learning. But [blinded] gives us the freedom to write what we think and what we feel without all of the citation, grammar checks, and reference mumbo jumbo. That is why I now truly understand mythology and can see it in my everyday life. It's the reason this course was one of the best experiences of my educational career.

If we attend to the theory above, this student's response is validating. S/he argues that her comprehension and application of the course subject owes *explicitly* to flexibility, autonomy, and focusing narrowly on the subject (or the student's ideas, as opposed to the technical "mumbo jumbo" that can often undermine or confuse the real intended learning outcome). As much as possible, then, we ought to add

into our online courses flexibility, autonomy, and a cull of unnecessary technical detail.

Third, as the second student comment built from the first, so too this third student substantiates the second. S/he suggests how teachers in focusing too narrowly on the content, and Freirian "banking" it, neglect the idiosyncratic student experience, prior knowledge, and investment. Thus, through interest surveys (and related strategies in educational theory, etc.) and constant effort to find and highlight meaningful rationales for the course subject, we may earn student engagement:

So many times professors get it wrong with how they teach material in giving it to us and not telling us why we need it. In this course, [blinded] let us have just enough freedom within each assignment that every thing we did applied to our own lives. That is the way to get a student's attention, apply what they are learning to their own lives!

This essay offers no pithy remark on a panacea. Online teaching requires a great deal of work for successful outcomes. One of the major hurdles facing online teachers is the dearth of affective and social interaction. We understand, intuitively, why a conversation, in-person, vivid corporeality and all, *means* more to us. I might suggest even for the introverted teacher or scholar, we are social (e.g., see Jeffrey Condran's thoughtful essay "From Kafka's Window" in *The Missouri Review*). As we think on our most meaningful, powerful, or provocative learning, it's doubtful we're recalling a discussion board or a Google Meet session or a five-part Lincoln Learning lesson. The affective, subjective components missing from online teaching might be added. Precedent exists "advocating for these possibilities in education, even as we face the unprecedented and continuing confluence of corona/covid pandemic and political unrest. Teachers can look to critical pedagogues, writing at the crux of political

challenges to conventional education: Joe Kincheloe, for instance, Paolo Freire, Donaldo Macedo “reclaiming our humanity,” Philip Corrigan advocating “possibilities” and “human capacities,” Henry Giroux on “enabling possibilities,” Peter McLaren’s “pedagogy of possibility,” and Sheila Macrine’s “hope and possibilities.” When *The Chronicle of Higher Education* asks about the intellectual costs of email and administration bloat, teachers might think of the possibilities in detaching from those bloated and inane inboxes for more direct interaction with students through apps like Remind. Coupled with increased student autonomy, teacher flexibility, and the earnest work at communicating, understanding, and building an active curriculum, we may have made it through a fruitful discussion and into a workable empathic model of online education.

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