

# **Learning to Teach in Higher Education... Online... During a Pandemic: A personal reflection paper from Canada**

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I am a doctoral candidate, a former early childhood educator, a former elementary teacher. I am an academic writing researcher, interested in the affective and social aspects of academic writing. I am a mother, a spouse, a daughter, an artist, a friend, a Canadian. I am also a new higher educator. I tell you about the many facets of my identity because integrating these many roles has been important during the past year when all our living was constrained to four walls. There have been no changes in venue possible to signal changes in role. In this reflective writing, I will share some of my experiences of learning to teach in higher education, the pathway I took on this online adventure, and how my online teaching has been influenced by the pandemic context.

I was fortunate enough to teach my first course a year and a half prior to the pandemic. When I taught this first course in higher education, I managed the massive task by returning to the principles I learned as an early childhood educator and as an elementary teacher: show, don't tell; learning occurs through active engagement with the environment; students can achieve more with an experienced guide than they're able to on their own (thank you, Vygotsky). I thought back to my own favourite higher education learning experiences. I had no interest in being the sage on the stage or in recreating the three-hour lectures that I sat through during some of my own undergraduate courses. I settled into a teaching routine with lots of back-and-forth communication with my students, ten-minute introductions to content interspersed with longer, interactive content-rich, usually social, activities.

Towards the end of my second year of teaching, the pandemic hit, and we, with the vast majority of higher education, moved online. Completing that course online was done on an emergency basis – using band-aid solutions to limp to the semester's finish line. Just after we moved online, I was offered a new course to prepare, my first fully online teaching experience. The course had to be fully asynchronous, with no mandatory time-bound meetings.

### **Basing Decisions on Teaching Principles**

While preparing that first fully online course, I spent 150 hours considering content, technology, texts, assessment, and interactions. I was able to track my time in half-hour increments because I was tracking my dissertation progress using the same method. I had many options to weigh in the process of course creation, necessitating some prioritization. Once again, I turned to some of the basic principles on which I'm building my teaching practice. One of my elementary teaching friends tells me that any time she didn't know exactly what to do in a given situation, especially when she was starting her teaching career, she went back to the theories she'd learned during her teacher education degree. This practice gives learning theories a rich purpose in the classroom.

My first consideration was based on a classic: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). I wanted to support student safety and security by considering that students may be struggling financially; I wanted to choose a textbook that wasn't overly expensive yet covered all the foundational research topics. I made a list of topics from syllabi that had been generously shared with me by former instructors of the course, and from my own experiences. Once I had the list, I gathered possible texts and graded them on multiple criteria including, topic coverage, price, credibility, accessibility, and readability.

Once the text was selected, I considered TPACK, or technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). Gauging my own TPACK and considering students' familiarity with the now-expanded technology needs, I wanted to replicate some of the in-person teaching strategies in the online environment with as little discomfort for the students as possible. I looked into the capabilities of our learning management system and found a tool that would enable me to put all of the students' materials in one, easy-to-follow format. In this format, we could easily switch back and forth between content and discussion elements.

Thirdly, I started to take into account the emotional factors of online learning. Students often feel a sense of isolation during online learning (Reilly, et al., 2012). By increasing my focus on making connections online and encouraging students to build an online community, it may be possible to counteract those detrimental feelings. I built in multiple opportunities each week for students to interact with each other, suggested guidelines for creating supportive scholarly discussions, and based part of the participation element on this engagement. The student evaluations indicated that this engagement was not enough, however.

Reading the student evaluations from that first online course was an emotional roller coaster – I didn't know how to interpret them. While many students indicated their appreciation, my focus was caught by the few who expressed dissatisfaction, particularly the feedback that felt unreasonable or that was not productive. I felt like I had put a great deal of effort into my online classes, welcoming students in two optional office hours each week, emailing individuals frequently to check in, and interacting with the students at least five days each week in the discussion forums. From my online teaching communities and from professors and instructors I know, there seems to be a trend of students requiring more support over the pandemic year. This increased need for support is not surprising given the current emotional upheaval. Unfortunately, there have also been many instances of plummeting student satisfaction as measured

through course evaluations. I decided to learn what other approaches might help the students feel supported and engaged. One approach to respond to the student comments seemed to be an increased focus on building rapport.

Instructor-student rapport can be defined as a relationship with positive interactions, successful communication, and mutual understanding (Bernieri, 1988; Carey, et al., 1986). Glazier (2016) identifies three strategies for rapport-building in the online higher education classroom: humanizing oneself as the instructor, connecting with students through the feedback process, and one-to-one communication with each student. She also offers several practical suggestions for building instructor-student rapport, including producing short videos to connect with students, emailing the students individually, and providing individual comments on assignments (Glazier, 2021). While I was already doing the latter two, I have decided to create videos for my courses. This will be part of my strategy to increase a sense of instructor presence and participation.

Indeed, as I plan courses for the coming semester, I have resolved to stretch myself and embrace discomfort. The thought of interacting with strangers online can bring anxiety, but the research is clear that interactions between students and instructors build relationships that are important for student success. Clearly, I need to get to know my students better so they aren't strangers, foster relationships to overcome the distance that can be experienced while teaching and learning online, and cultivate the ethic of care to support my growth mindset as it relates to building relationships (Dweck, 2006; Noddings, 2012).

### **Working through Overwhelm**

Teaching in higher education is tremendously rewarding. The possibilities for interactions, preparation, grading, and supporting students can expand to fit whatever time you offer to it, however. This possibility for expansion seems to have grown exponentially during the pandemic when teachers can be constantly at their desks. I have experienced a constant need to balance what feels urgent (What exactly does a stay-at-home order entail? Which level of lockdown are we at now? Who qualifies for immunization right now?), what is pulling my attention (How do I create a video for my conference presentation? How do I choose between the many sidebar topics that are piquing my curiosity? How do I turn down any of the multitude of online learning and community opportunities available?), with what needs to be done (attending to student needs, trying to create a rich online community for my students, grading, reading, writing).

I have come to better appreciate the need for self-care. I have been building a supportive online community with exciting faculty committees and with multiple online writing groups. I have been learning to say no to opportunities that don't further my personal growth or academic goals. Perhaps most importantly, I am realizing that to create a caring environment for students I also involves creating a caring environment for their instructor (Bali, 2021; Costa, 2021).

Because I have never prepared to teach online without being in a pandemic, I can't say with any certainty the ways in which the pandemic has altered the online teaching experience. As I reflect on my experiences, however, I can make some observations. During my first online course in May 2020, I felt a

sense of comradery from the students – online learning was new to most of us, there was a sense of fun. Even with the underlying stresses and uncertainties, there was a “let’s get through this together” approach. By September, however, everyone knew that we had a long road ahead. The virus was better understood but there was more divisiveness, a growing fatigue, and a consistent underlying stress. The collective trauma and the growing loss of life seemed to wear on the spirits of instructors and students, increasing the need for gentle interactions and lessening the need for strict adherence to rigorous policies.

### **Looking Forward**

As I finish preparation for the upcoming semester, I’m starting to look forward future courses and ways that I can continue to improve my practice for my current and future students. As I read the literature and learn from academics whom I admire, I have come across concepts that were new to me, some important considerations that will help me to improve my courses, and concepts that I am now learning more about and that will inform my future teaching.

Given the year that we have all just experienced, I think that trauma-informed pedagogy will be important for helping our students, and ourselves, create successful learning experiences (e.g., Imad, 2020). Trauma-informed pedagogy recognizes the effects of stress on the body and brain and the effects of emotions on learning. I am incorporating these concepts by considering Falot and Harris’ (2009) five pillars of trauma-informed care: physical and emotional safety, trustworthiness, maximizing students’ control and choice, collaboration, and empowerment and skill-building (pp. 7-10). I am beginning to focus on these elements by continuing to foster a collegial and supportive atmosphere, by adding flexibility with due dates and participation modalities, and by offering additional opportunities for students to collaborate on understanding the course readings.

My ongoing goals include continuing to learn more about World Englishes and decolonizing academic writing. I am also improving my research methods course by expanding my focus on including research methods scholars of colour.

My husband had his first dose of the vaccine today and I hope to have mine within the next couple of weeks. I am optimistic that the end of the pandemic is in sight. As a result, I am thinking through the lessons I have learned over the pandemic and reflecting on which of the changes I’ve made should continue with me after we are able to be back in the classroom with our students (e.g., McMurtrie, 2021). The accessibility provided by online education leads me to believe that a hybrid model might continue to have some advantages in the future. I have a feeling, however, that of the skills I’m building, the ability to focus on supporting and connecting with my students will be the most valuable. I’m looking forward to continuing this higher education pedagogical adventure.

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