



What COVID-19 Taught Us About Pedagogy and Social Justice—Pandemic or Not

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic (in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter Movement) exposed pervasive inequities, challenges, and opportunities to explore and implement “best” pedagogical practices to improve how we address social justice issues. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified intergenerational gaps for the already vulnerable, under-resourced, and marginalized in our society. In response, we propose four “best practices” to embrace in our classrooms. These are: (a) fostering flexibility to bridge equity gaps; (b) rethinking the pedagogical panopticon; (c) emphasizing listening to and affirming students’ struggles; and (d) employing student-centered accountability. The authors detail some specific inequalities that were brought to the surface during the Spring and Summer of 2020, offer “best practices” in response to such inequities, and stress the need for a student-centered pedagogy that serves to improve teaching and learning not just during a crisis, but also in semesters and years to come.

With the onset of school shutdowns in March 2020, social media groups such as “Pandemic Pedagogy” and “Comm Studies Online Pedagogy” emerged to discuss “best practice” pedagogies in remote instruction. Essentially, these groups provided a forum to debate best practices in terms of delivery (e.g., should classes be synchronous or asynchronous) and content, particularly in response to the social justice issues exposed during the wave of Black Lives Matter protests. These conversations tend to be grounded in an assumption that pandemic pedagogy is a temporary solution to managing education during a unique crisis situation. In this essay, we argue that the COVID-19 crisis exposed and perpetuated inequities that

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already pervade the landscape of higher education. Consequently, we propose “best practices” that are not only ideal for improving higher education pedagogies during this crisis event, but also post-crisis. These include: (a) fostering flexibility to bridge equity gaps; (b) rethinking the pedagogical panopticon; (c) listening to and affirming student struggles; and (d) employing student-centered accountability. In doing so, we provide a framework for fostering resilience during the current crisis and permanently shifting our pedagogies toward social justice pedagogies long after the crisis has been resolved.

Fostering Flexibility to Bridge Equity Gaps

Although the COVID-19 pandemic made systemic inequities in higher education more visible, these inequities undoubtedly existed long before the pandemic. In fact, more than 19 million U.S. Americans lack basic access to broadband internet and many more lack *reliable* access (Federal Communications Commission, 2019). Rural communities are hit the hardest, and rising unemployment rates will likely lead to loss of internet as an essential service for low-income and unemployed U.S. Americans.¹ Findings from the Pew Research Center also report that Blacks and Hispanics are far less likely than Whites to have a computer at home, forcing them to rely on smartphones to fill the digital divide (Atske & Perrin, 2021). As a California State Representative explained in her arguments for a bill that would help close the digital divide among college students:

Even before the pandemic, access to the internet was a necessity for students to enroll in classes, research, write papers, and communicate with professors and peers. Now, high-speed internet is a requirement for attending lectures, reviewing class materials, and submitting assignments. If you lack a strong internet connection, you can't participate in a class conducted on Zoom. (Eshoo, 2020, para. 7)

Put simply, students at colleges and universities are facing wage reductions and rising tuition costs without guaranteed access to the tools necessary to level the educational playing field. These inequities have historically impacted graduation rates for students of color and those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Stout et al., 2018). Moreover, “COVID-19’s impact on students from low-income families and underrepresented minorities will continue to resound at universities for a decade or more because of its effects on K-12 students” (Levander & Decherney, 2020, para. 7). For the foreseeable future, we must rethink our policies and practices in light of accessibility and economic disparities, as well as mental health implications made transparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One way to address social inequities is to be flexible when, for instance, (a) designing assignments, (b) setting deadlines, and (c) requiring educational reading materials.

First, instructors need to think outside the (in)box when it comes to assignments. For example, using Google Voice would allow students without access to a computer (or a smartphone) and/or reliable internet to write rather than type their assignments then audio record them for their instructors. Such an approach would increase access for a group of students who may not consistently have access to a computer. Moreover, creating multiple assignment option platforms (e.g., electronically submitted papers, video recorded performances, web form submissions, voice recorded oral histories, etc.) and flexible assignment deadlines would also address inequities based on computer and internet access.

1. Chief Data Analytics Officer for Microsoft, Kahan (2019) found that “counties with the highest unemployment also have the lowest broadband usage (and broadband access)” (para. 2).

Second, the collective trauma experienced as a result of this prolonged crisis event (Watson et al., 2020) will have long-lasting effects on students and faculty. The rigidity with which we implement policies such as deadlines needs to be reconsidered. While setting and achieving deadlines is an important skill, so is balancing mental health, supplementing income with (sometimes multiple) jobs, and general self-care.

Third, it would behoove us to consider flexibility with our expectations for purchasing texts. For example, students can use open-access resources at no cost. As we plunge into a recession, more underserved and underrepresented populations will return to higher education as a stop gap or as a place to increase their human capital. We have a very real opportunity to increase access to education for these students by using our college or university resources and tapping into collective knowledge. For those students who have less reliable internet, holding extra copies of print texts at the library and in the instructor's office for loan can alleviate financial and mental strain, as well.

Rethinking the Pedagogical Panopticon

Another way to address social inequities is rooted in the current pedagogical panopticon—a system of strategies that allow instructors to oversee what their students are doing as participants in the classroom. At deeper ideological levels, taken-for-granted beliefs and hidden ideologies shape how the pedagogical panopticon functions at any given time. Some examples are White supremacy, institutionalized racism, and neoliberal multiculturalism. To illustrate, under the patterns of White supremacy and institutionalized racism, Smith (2004) describes the college classroom as “a racial theater of contentious, racially primed, White students positioned to unleash their racial weapons (read: discourse and attitudes) of destruction” against Black and other instructors of color (p. 180). The panopticon, a concept originally theorized by Jeremy Bentham, was later used by Foucault (1977) to describe systems of power and discipline. Like a watchtower in a prison yard, the prisoners always assume that they are being watched and should act accordingly. When applied to the classroom, certain practices and policies are implemented simply to enforce power and discipline. Longstanding practices might include Turnitin plagiarism checkers, student usage reports on learning management systems, and physical exam proctors. It has even been suggested that facial recognition software can be used to monitor students' level of engagement (Andrejevic & Selwyn, 2019).

The panopticon has been blown out of proportion in remote learning settings. First, many educators have been encouraged to use lockdown browsers, such as Respondus or Proctorio, to record students with a webcam while taking their exam in real time. However, ongoing research about facial recognition software has found extreme racial and gender bias. One such study found a .8% error rate for light-skinned males compared to 34.7% for dark-skinned females (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018). Additionally, the privacy implications for a program that records suspicious noises and movement disproportionately affects already marginalized groups. As Swauger (2020) explains, settings that flag loud noises or leaving a room, “disproportionately impact women who typically take on the majority of childcare, breastfeeding, lactation, and caretaking roles for their families” (p. 55). Swauger also notes that students with physical injuries, visual impairment, and non-neurotypical behaviors are also likely to be flagged as suspicious based on the tool's algorithm.

These same privacy issues call into question the practice of asking remote, synchronous learners to turn their cameras on for the duration of class. While the expectation may be to treat students as if they were attending class in person, the aforementioned economic challenges, exacerbated by the fact that many

students have been sent to unsafe homes (e.g., domestic violence, food insecurity, lack of sanitation), make this policy a social justice issue. Student access to education should not come at the cost of privacy and safety.

To counter these panoptical pedagogies, we must rethink ways to assess what we are teaching students that can persist beyond the era of remote education. Darby (2020) suggests that a simple discussion forum may be a great equalizer. As Darby explains, this space allows students to submit their contribution at any time, not requiring them to show their physical space, and still creates a way for students to stay engaged in the process. Darby further notes that it is important to have a structure and a presence in these online discussions. Discussion forums address the question of engagement without requiring optical presence in synchronous spaces or exam proctoring software. In addition to discussion forums, instructors can offer multiple options for assignments. For example, students might choose to write a short reflection paper or create an analytical podcast. Creating multiple options limits the likelihood of plagiarism, while eliminating the virtual panopticon described above.

Listening to and Affirming Student Struggles

A third way to improve best practices that was exposed as a result of the pandemic is rooted in mental health issues that pervade experiences of students and faculty. These issues are exacerbated for people and groups facing the multifaceted implications of this pandemic ranging from food scarcity and health disparity to employment inequities (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Moreover, while COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on some struggles, many of them are *unseen* ones that do not necessarily present themselves on Zoom. Furthermore, underrepresented and marginalized students often do not feel comfortable voicing their concerns, needs, or struggles. Perhaps the most looming contributor to ongoing stress is mental wellness, which becomes even more challenging for those already fighting racial battle fatigue—unpacking “the physiological, psychological, and behavioral strain exacted on racially marginalized and stigmatized groups that the amount of energy they expend coping with and fighting against racism” (Smith, 2008, p. 617).

Depression and anxiety have been steadily increasing for college students worldwide (Auerbach et al., 2018) and U.S. Americans more generally (American College Health Association, 2018). The pandemic has added social isolation and trauma to the list of mental health concerns afflicting students. Campus services for students with disabilities have long encouraged faculty to have flexible attendance policies, alternative assignments, and moving due dates to accommodate the impact of mental health on students’ studies. However, a growing tendency to disbelieve and even stigmatize student mental health issues had led to under-reporting by students (Greenbaum et al., 1995; Lawless, 2020; Quick et al., 2003). We argue that this under-reporting has been exacerbated by the pandemic. As Williams and Reetz (2020) explain:

Demands for mental-health care already overmatched campus counseling services and structures, long before anyone heard the word ‘coronavirus.’ Students with anxiety, depression, and grief—in the wake of months of loss and uncertainty—will present both clinical and capacity challenges for institutions. Some students who have never sought counseling before may be in desperate need of support in the Fall [2020]. (para. 3)

Given the undeniable impact of mental health issues on entire academic communities, we must reflect on and modify our general communication about mental illness, immediacy behaviors, and trust-building

techniques. Even in the wake of our own traumas, our power-ridden instinct might be to suggest that everyone pull together and accomplish a list of tasks. This approach is inherently privileged and can result in *epistemological incongruence* for students struggling with mental health and illness (Lawless, 2020). We have a responsibility, in the wake of inequitable access to resources, to listen to our students' needs, accommodate when we can, and engage in critical reflexivity about our own assumptions and biases around mental illness.

Employing Student-Centered Accountability

Even though universities are often *imagined* as liberal spaces where faculty and students support diversity and engage in intellectually stimulating activities with respect, the reality—especially for faculty, staff, and students from minoritized groups—is that “universities may be the last bastion of elitism and sanctioned racism in the United States” (Niemann et al., 2020, p. 3). As disheartening as this may sound, it is sobering to understand this as the context in which we promote social justice within U.S. colleges and universities, particularly during a time of both the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests.

When thinking about social justice as a co-created goal and process in the moment of pandemic pedagogy with widening equity gaps and looming austerity, we wonder specifically what it means to promote and advocate for social justice within our classes without it becoming “rhetoric without accountability that ends up being meaningless” (Niemann et al., 2020, p. 4). In spring and summer of 2020, we observed a popular move by those running centers for teaching and learning to offer a collection of diversity reading resources for instructors to consider as a means to address social justice issues. Yet, we both recall feeling overwhelmed as we juggled work, childcare, homeschooling, and mental health self-care. To be honest, we were so overwhelmed that finding time to browse the resources and links provided was not realistic. What can providing lists, links, or collections of resources do for social justice at an uncertain time? Moreover, list-making strategies that prioritize certain options and resources over others might function to demystify the struggles rather than shine a spotlight on critical issues that require attention, conversation, and critical engagement. Similarly, Fujiwara (2020) describes her experience with administrators engaging in “a *diversity shuffle* whereby they created overly complex, meaningless diversity plans with lots of pages, categories, tables, and charts . . . Because they knew so little about institutional racism, they thought those efforts were sufficient, that their diversity work was done” (p. 113). This COVID-19 moment serves a critical reminder that we ought to work with our students to dismantle institutional and structural racism.

At a time of political polarization, division, and toxicity under the Trump Administration, we realize that collaboration might be the best antidote. Thus, we advocate for collaborative approaches to social justice that underscores the *social* in social justice. In addition to social justice being a co-created goal and process, *social* justice amplifies that a *social* and *justice-governed* process requires community building to sustain ourselves through (un)anticipated battle fatigues. Pedagogically, a social and justice-governed process in the classroom considers participants' salient social identities, attends to how power circulates and organizes social dynamics within the classroom, and works toward challenging inequalities enabled/constrained by unequal social systems, particularly (anti-Black) racism.

Manzo (2020) states that “advocacy for racial equity cannot be done without the support of Faculty of Color, and without supporting them in return” (p. 290). One way of ensuring that social justice in the classroom is not just empty or meaningless rhetoric, or becoming “a diversity shuffle” (Fujiwara, 2020, p. 113), is to co-create realistic goals, processes, and practices with the voices and struggles of minoritized students at the center. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this could mean surveying students’ needs and concerns prior to the start of the term, designing the course with such needs and concerns in mind, and frequently checking in with students in more precarious, unstable, and insecure positions. Such practices can pave the way for greater accountability and more equity-minded practices in a post-pandemic academia.

Conclusion

The practices we propose here are not necessarily novel. However, the events and implications of COVID-19 serve as reminders regarding what is truly important in our classrooms. Rather than submitting to a mode of pandemic thinking that encourages reactionary decision-making, we argue that the current political and social moment creates an opportunity for us to pause, re-evaluate, and re-center our teaching practices with realistic accountability for social justice. The COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter Movement has exacerbated issues that were already present and will persist long after a turn toward normalcy. As such, we offer these “best practices” in hopes that they will inform long-term pedagogical practices in ways that reduce disparities and promote equity and inclusion.

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