
February 2022

A Review of My Teaching Philosophy Through a COVID-19 Lens

Michelle L. Boettcher
Clemson University, mboettc@clemson.edu

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS!

Essays in Education (EIE) is a professional, peer-reviewed journal intended to promote practitioner and academic dialogue on current and relevant issues across human services professions. The editors of *EIE* encourage both novice and experienced educators to submit manuscripts that share their thoughts and insights. Visit <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie> for more information on submitting your manuscript for possible publication.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boettcher, Michelle L. (2022) "A Review of My Teaching Philosophy Through a COVID-19 Lens," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 28 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol28/iss1/4>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by OpenRiver. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Essays in Education* by an authorized editor of OpenRiver. For more information, please contact klarson@winona.edu.

A Review of My Teaching Philosophy Through a COVID-19 Lens

Cover Page Footnote

My appreciation to Dr. Leslie Lewis for her feedback, editing, and encouragement on this manuscript and to the students who inspired me to write it.

As I moved from student affairs (housing and then conduct) into my faculty role, I drafted a teaching philosophy that has evolved each year since I started at Clemson University in 2014. As I thought about my work since the COVID-19 pandemic started, and looking ahead, I thought about how who I am as an educator and what I focus on in my teaching have changed in the past year and a half.

My philosophy remains the same in many ways, but what *has* changed is how who I am as an educator shows up in new ways. Before March of 2020n I would have said that I teach content about my field while showing a sense of care for students. Today, the opposite is true. I have become a faculty member who shows care to students and also fits in time to teach content. The students come first.

I am disappointed that this has not always been the case. I certainly have shown care for students in moments of crisis. As a former residence life and conduct person, crisis is one of my areas of expertise. When a student reaches out to ask for help navigating a situation, accessing resources, or even simply for understanding about an absence or late assignment, I have been very accommodating.

But how do you accommodate students' needs when they do not tell you what those needs are? How do you accommodate students' needs when students actually may not be entirely sure what it is they need? How do you anticipate and accommodate students' needs when you cannot possibly guess what those needs are because you yourself have never been a student during a pandemic?

As I reflect on these questions, I am also called to reflect on how our current context alters or clarifies who I am as an educator. By examining my teaching philosophy, I have come to understand the role of *caring as course content* in my work. Instead of simply asking students to be caring as they become professionals, I have explicitly told students that I care about them and aligned my actions accordingly. No matter what the course is, role modeling caring through my interactions with students – in or out of class – is part of my teaching. When we talk about addressing student affairs issues or workplace challenges, I infuse those conversations with questions about how we not only achieve goals, meet deadlines, and deal with conflict ethically, but also how we can specifically show students we care for them – in fact, how showing care is a part of

our ethical obligation to others. Using my philosophy as a framework, I clarified who I am as a teacher during COVID-19 and what I can take forward from the pandemic to inform my teaching in the future.

Expertise, Mistakes, and Reflection

In my teaching statement for the past few years, I have included the following:

Expertise + Mistakes + Reflection = Learning

My goal as an educator is to facilitate learning rather than to simply lecture (Chism, et al., 1973). As a result, I draw upon my expertise in student affairs. Similarly, I ask the students to contribute their areas of expertise from their undergraduate experiences, graduate assistantships, and practicum and internship experiences.

Additionally, in the classes I teach, mistakes are fundamental to learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001). Students often hear me say, “I don’t know if this is going to work or not, but let’s try it and see what happens.” If it works, great. If it does not work, great. Either way we have topics to discuss and lessons learned.

Finally, when I teach, reflection is essential to learning and understanding (Grow, 1991; Keegan, 2009; Mezirow, 1991, 2009). The reality, of course, is that this is not simply my teaching philosophy and expectation for students, but my philosophy for my own learning and development as well. I not only ask students to engage reflectively, but reflection is built into my teaching every week as well as at the end of each semester and the end of each academic year. I journal, I engage in administrative activities and professional development related to my teaching, and I process about what has gone well (or not).

To exemplify how expertise, mistakes, and reflection have shown up for me as a faculty member during the pandemic, I offer three stories – one on each topic. My expertise story relates to how I tried to get to know students during our Zoom experience in the fall of 2020. The mistakes story is about reframing students’ ideas about “no excuse” for late work and then applying that same reframe to my own work. The third

story of reflection has to do with redefining rigor for students in my teaching and for myself in my own work outside of teaching.

Context

Before I begin, I want to provide the setting where I do my work and the students with whom I learn each year. I am at Clemson University, a land-grant, research one institution in the Southeast. This is my first full-time job as a faculty member, though I have been an educator in student affairs most of my career. I currently teach in the student affairs master's program. I work with graduate students who will go on to work in residence life, student activities, financial aid, in diversity/inclusion/equity work with students, campus recreation, and areas of student experience in academics as academic advisors or through academic success programs. These students spend two years studying students – often through the lens of themselves and their own college experiences.

Along the way these graduate students will learn about student development theory, law and ethics, social justice, research and assessment, and a number of other areas. As emerging professionals, graduates of our program will leave with knowledge and skills to support students through their academic careers. For me, teaching by doing and role modeling ways to support these graduate students through their pandemic academic careers aligns with the curricular content of the program.

Example One: Expertise: Getting to Know Students

My student affairs expertise shows up in my teaching all of the time. I worked in housing at four different institutions. I was an assistant dean and director of student conduct for seven years. I have supervised dozens of full-time and student staff members. I have engaged in strategic planning and crisis response and have facilitated more trainings and workshops than I can remember. I was good as a student affairs professional and was lucky to be a part of many strong teams. In addition, I had the opportunity to learn from

leaders and colleagues whose ethics and senses of integrity did not align with my own. I bring all of that into class.

It is important for me to acknowledge a few other considerations regarding my teaching as well. I teach only graduate students. I am a recently tenured white woman faculty member with tremendous occupational and social privileges. I am old enough that my insights are rarely challenged. When I speak, students pay attention or at least try to appear to be paying attention. I teach small sections – usually 20 or fewer students.

One of the most important lessons I learned – and expertise I carry into my work to this day – is the importance of relationships. Starting as an undergraduate resident assistant at Iowa State University, I learned that if people only see you coming when there is a problem or someone is in trouble, they do not look forward to seeing you. I have always done my best to get to know the students I have served as well as the staff and colleagues I supervised and with whom I collaborated.

Before March of 2020, I would have said I did the same with the students in the classes I teach. I would have said that I was approachable, caring, genuine, and supportive. I was. Correction, I was if students came to me first. Until the pandemic, I did not initiate conversations with a lot of students other than the ones I directly advise. In the past year and a half, instead of waiting for students to reach out, I have invited them to meet with me as a co-architect in our learning relationship.

In the fall of 2020, for example, since I had not met the first year students in the 45-person student services course I was teaching and since I had not had the second year students in either section of the law and ethics courses I taught, I set up one-on-one meetings with each of the students. The meetings were brief (15-20 minutes), and I had no set agenda for them. I wanted to know a bit about each student and see if there was support or information they needed from me. I know how important it is to get to know students. I knew that as a faculty member, but in the past, I had put the work on them instead of partnering in the relationship building. The pandemic has taught me new ways to use my expertise. This is but one example.

Example 2: Mistakes - Reframing “No Excuse”

Mistakes are a part of learning. Much of the best learning I have done has been as a result of taking a risk, failing, and improving. Prior to my faculty role, I was a student conduct officer. That job is all about learning from our mistakes. This has carried into my work as a faculty member. I am comfortable with my mistakes, and I work to help students get comfortable with their mistakes as aspects of learning as well.

That said, I was surprised when at least three times in the fall of 2020 I received emails from students in the first year cohort that began, “I’m sorry this assignment is late. I have no good excuse.” Or some variation thereof. To each of them I responded:

I appreciate your message, but while this may have been a mistake on your part, I would argue you actually have some *very good excuses* for this to be late. You are in the first year of your graduate program. You are navigating a demanding assistantship as well as your courses. Also, you are in the middle of a pandemic. If those are not good excuses for overlooking an assignment, I don’t know what a “good” excuse is.

In each case the students expressed appreciation for the reframe of their situations.

As I have hoped for grace myself from the students as I taught courses for the first time (during a pandemic) and I have struggled to keep up with all of the “We need this information in the next two days” requests (during a pandemic) and I have tried to stay on task with my own goals for my work (during a pandemic), I have tried to afford caring flexibility to others. If I cannot offer grace and understanding to students and those around me right now, how can I expect it from others or even afford it to myself?

I have made MANY mistakes since March of 2020. Some have been related to teaching: What I say in class and the syllabus do not exactly match or I put two different due dates for the same assignment. Or I put something in Canvas that I later remove from the syllabus but forget to remove from Canvas. I have missed responding to a few emails. I have missed some writing deadlines with my collaborators.

And I have made all of these errors *during a pandemic*. We have to offer grace to our students. We have to offer grace to ourselves. We have to do this certainly during a

pandemic, but this grace is something we also need to carry ahead as we build a better future in higher education.

Example Three: Reflection - Redefining Rigor

Finally, in reflecting on my teaching I have given a lot of time to thinking about “academic rigor.” For me rigor is not about assigning a ton of reading or pretending like mine is the only course students have and overloading students with assignments. For me rigor is about challenge, opportunities for learning and growth, and high standards.

For me, teaching with the same assignments, the same amount of reading, the same expectations for student productivity as in “olden times” (before March 2020) would not constitute rigor. It would be me doing what I have always done and then adding, “Now do all of this remotely. Navigate a pandemic – whatever that means for you, your family, and your life. Do this all from the same room where you sleep, have meetings, do your graduate assistantship, and have your social life.” I want students to learn and grow and that does not happen when I push them past their limits. If I were to engage in teaching that way, it would become an exercise in privilege with the assumption that students have no additional family or personal responsibilities, no grief to navigate, and high quality internet access. That is not rigor. That is abuse.

My favorite class to teach is law and ethics, which I teach each fall semester. I tell people that I wish students had to take the course every semester because it is so interesting and there is so much to cover that we can never really get to everything. Recently, however, I have had to really focus on the most important pieces and helping students retain that information rather than trying to cover as much as possible. Few if any of us have the capacity to do more and more and more in class because we are all being required to do more and more and more just to navigate life and the world around us.

I did not give up on the content, the rigor, or the student engagement. I do not add more reading or assignments so students will think my courses are difficult. I now focus on students learning and retaining information. Instead of quantity, I have focused

on the complexity of student affairs work by giving them difficult questions to wrestle with. I have offered students questions that they will have to engage with and address as professionals. I made our time in class about their learning, not my teaching.

Conclusion

The pandemic has taught us a lot of lessons, as well as offering us lessons we have chosen not to learn, yet. As I look at my teaching through the lens of the pandemic, I find a concept I teach in law and ethics to be reinforced. I tell students, “Ultimately, you will have to decide one day if you prioritize consistency or fairness. You cannot prioritize both.” This is a difficult choice to make. Consistency is about the policy involved. It is the easier route. Fairness is about the people involved.

“Online instruction has been implemented following spring break, through the remainder of the semester” is how the email from Clemson read on March 20, 2020. Grief, fear, isolation, anger, and frustration have been a few of the many, many emotions students (and faculty and staff and everyone else in the world) have experienced since then. I would not have been able to predict that going online and engaging over screens would increase my level of care and concern for students and others with whom I work. The distance brought us closer.

Every day my first thought about the students in our program was: “Are they safe and healthy?” The administrivia of my work became very small on the landscape of my vocation. It was still there, but it mattered less. Instead of a focus on deadlines, paperwork, grading homework and class projects, and meeting deadlines, a new focus emerged for me. A focus on the humanity of students. I thought I was focused on the students before. I focus on them with much more attention and intention as a result of the pandemic.

I will keep revising my teaching statement, but it is now more of a student learning statement. It should not have taken a pandemic to make me realize that.

References

- Chism, N. V. N., Lees, N. D., & Evenbeck, S. (2002). Faculty development for teaching. *Liberal Education*, 88(3), 34-41.
- Grow, G. (1991). Teaching learners to be self-directed. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 41(3), 125-149.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. (1990). Informal and incidental learning in the workplace. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (2001). Informal and incidental learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2001(89), 25-34.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative dimensions of adult learning. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2009). An overview on transformative learning. In K. Illerius, (Ed.), *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 90-105). New York, NY: Routledge.