Spring 2020

Faculty COVID-19 Reflection 4

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Next semester, if we are back to meeting on campus, we need to seriously consider bringing in mental health counselors and trauma specialists to be able to help faculty unpack what has happened in the last few months. I am getting through my work and doing my best to meet the needs of my students but I feel, and I believe that most faculty feel, that we’re fighting an uphill battle just to get to the end of the semester. Our students did not sign up for online classes (unless they did, which I was teaching one course online before this began) and I have had several of my students tell me how much they miss having regular, in-class interactions because they feel overwhelmed by the transition (too many competing emails, too many online assignments, too many new deadlines) or because they don’t learn well in an online environment and prefer to learn face-to-face. I, frankly, feel a bit adrift myself. I live by myself, and my personal social interactions in the last month with real, physical people, have been restricted to me talking for twenty seconds to a neighbor from 20 feet away while walking my dog, and thanking the cashier at the local grocery store for working during this difficult time.

I had been teaching an online course before this began. EH 510 was planned out and had clear goals and assignments for the entire semester before March 13th, so when the orders came to shift to online, it required some adjustments, but they were fairly minor. My other classes, however, had to suddenly go online with little prep work on my end and in a short amount of time. My goal was to make it as easy for students as possible. My speech students had their assignment due dates pushed back and, for students who lacked good internet access, I have accepted submissions of MP3s for audio-only and Word .docx files for written versions of speeches. No students have required these, as I gave enough extensions that the students who lost internet access in the storms over Easter weekend were able to upload videos for their final assignments. I mentioned above, in the first session I attended, that one of the things the students wanted from faculty was reasonable flexibility. I have given more extensions in the last three weeks than I had in the past three semesters.

My EH 104 class is an honors freshman composition II course, and moving them online was more tricky, as much of the class is structured around classroom discussion. I utilized FlipGrid, which is a video sharing platform for educators, to be able to allow students to post video questions, that I would respond to with short videos of my own, and I found professionally-made YouTube videos on the plays that I was going to teach them myself. I realize that I could have tried to make my own videos, but in the amount of time that I had, and the production values I felt capable of at the time, things from Crash Course felt just as informative as anything I could have produced. Students were asked to write on videos and reflect on them as well. This was just to replace the classroom discussion. Students lost no points if they didn’t do the assignment, but most took advantage of the opportunity to do so anyway. I threw out the final exam and moved the due-date of their final essay back to when the final exam was supposed to be scheduled. There were some hiccups with using Canvas for peer reviews – things that had we been able to meet in class where I could have walked them through the process would have probably been avoidable, to be frank – but overall most students were able to complete these new assignments. I still don’t have the final essays in yet as of the date of writing this, but I expect a 90% completion rate for the course at this point.
My EH 510 class was already online. I eased up on some of the parameters of the course, however. Students were required to do a weekly response video to a discussion question I posted on FlipGrid and I gave a blanket forgiveness to the last four weeks, where if a student missed up to two videos they weren’t counted against them. Many of the students are educators in high schools and middle schools or have other jobs and families of their own, and are dealing with added stressors. This allows them some freedom to take some time off from the reading, so long as they caught up later. I also granted essay extensions for the final two papers with no questions for any student who asked for one. The final paper was also changed from a 6-8 page research paper to an annotated bibliography on the topic that their research would have been on. This requires less work writing the essay, but still requires them to do academic research on a specific topic, and felt to be the best solution to making everyone’s final weeks easier yet still academically rigorous.

My work schedule has always been a bit odd, but right now it’s very odd. Things never really come to a conclusion. I give extensions, so even when I’ve graded “all” of the essays for an assignment, I usually haven’t really, because there’s a handful still out there waiting to be turned in still. Weekly assignments trickle in, meaning that I spend a little time all the time in grading bits and pieces of various classes. I spent ten minutes writing an email to answer a question that, if I could speak to the person and we both look at the same book together, would take a minute. I’ve offered zoom meetings with students on multiple occasions and I have had zero students take me up on the opportunity. Students who had been regularly attending class from January through March, in the last few weeks will stop submitting work; I will take out the time to email them, sometimes two or three times, and it feels like I’m sending emails off into a void. Sometimes the assignments get turned in after the second or third email and the second or third automatic extension. Sometimes they don’t.