



Heading for the Future After COVID-19: Reflections and Recommendations on Teaching Processes in a Rapidly Changing Learning Landscape

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic posed numerous challenges for instructors and students. Professors, for example, struggled to quickly and effectively migrate face-to-face courses to remote teaching modalities. What had not been anticipated, however, were the additional challenges to be managed when returning to face-to-face and in-person teaching. This reflective essay provides some insight into how faculty at the University of Puerto Rico attempted to modify teaching practices to re-engage disengaged students as they returned to the campus classroom. Also, recommendations about how to move forward by applying a pedagogy of renewal are made.

Introduction

In terms of teaching with technology, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the future to many academic institutions overnight. This was most certainly true at our institution in Puerto Rico. Many faculty members were abruptly thrust into an unknown reality. We went from teaching face-to-face in-person courses to teaching remotely in some combination of synchronous and asynchronous modalities. While technology had been used to assist teaching in our face-to-face courses, migrating them to different modalities posed challenges to professors and students. Moreover, some of us thought that we would be forced to teach remotely as a stopgap until the end of the semester. We had not even fathomed that it would take almost 2 years to go back to teaching face-to-face in-person courses!

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The process of returning to the classroom after sitting in front of a computer for 2 years has turned out to be highly stressful and exhausting for faculty members and students. For instance, I (Wanda) was assigned the same courses that I had been teaching prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. Like most of my colleagues, I prepared to teach using the same methods I used before the COVID-19 lockdown. However, to my confusion, those teaching methods no longer worked at all.

At the beginning of the semester, I prepared lessons, arrived in the classroom, and started teaching just to realize that I had to change the lesson plan right there because students did not do the homework or the readings. Or, if they did do the homework, it was incomplete and full of mistakes. The classroom environment had changed, as well. I had to compete with students having side conversations during class and leaving the classroom to take phone calls. Absenteeism was high because students were either taking time off to go on vacation, to pick up additional shifts at work, and to attend doctors' appointments. In my frustration, I ultimately decided to retire. My request was denied because: "You neither have the age nor the time accrued to retire." As a last resort, I did the only thing I could think of doing. I decided to ask students how they were coping with the return to the classroom.

What I learned was that students had changed. Many of these full-time students also got full-time jobs or multiple jobs during the lockdown. Therefore, finding time to do groupwork—which was challenging prior to the lockdown—was now nearly impossible. Some students were also dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students made vacation plans while on lockdown that they still wanted to take even after returning to face-to-face courses. Classroom management was difficult as many students had become accustomed to doing class in front of a computer. In addition, cognitively speaking, critical thinking skills were clearly lacking after 2 years of remote learning. Students were only able to describe concepts at the recall level.

To adapt my courses to reach these disengaged students and promote their intellectual growth in a rapidly changing landscape of teaching and learning, I started a journey of pedagogical renewal. This pedagogy has, according to Nava García (2020), "the aim of promoting a change in the way of teaching and promoting an active learning model, in contrast to the traditional education," which is characterized by a content-based teaching process, where students are passive actors, whose purpose was acquiring knowledge from a learning process based on repetition-memorization.

My pedagogical renewal journey began by attending webinars about teaching practices hosted by Dr. Carmen Pacheco-Sepúlveda, Director of the Academic Excellence Center on campus. Then, she hosted meetings with faculty members, so we all could try to make sense of what was happening in our classrooms. In discussing shared challenges, we were able to identify opportunities to address them. I learned that we can only maximize those opportunities through a pedagogy of renewal, by identifying where we were before COVID-19 and where we are now, to determine how to move forward. These conversations and the information that I gathered from students led me to modify my pedagogical approach in the classroom.

Pedagogy of Renewal

To engage students in this changing landscape of higher education, I now place the focus solely on them. They must be responsible for their learning. I flipped the classroom and now use an online learning platform where students have access to narrated presentations, readings, and quizzes to identify if they

recognize the concepts discussed in the lesson. That affords me the opportunity to work on enriching comprehension in the classroom. As part of this pedagogy, I integrated numerous exercises designed to learn by doing—a learning structure based on goal-based scenarios in which students pursue a goal by practicing target skills and using relevant content knowledge (Schank et al., 1999). Of course, these pedagogies were available before the pandemic; however, using them has become essential to engage students since then. I rely on a pedagogy of renewal that “involves learning new skills and knowledge, understanding how new knowledge is linked to practice, and recognizing how underlying beliefs influence the selection, enactment, and reflection of pedagogical approaches” (Di Biase et al., 2021).

Although it was a best practice in the past, today we must identify students’ profiles so we can create content that is relevant to them and their lived experiences. To do so, we need to answer the following questions: Why are they registered in the academic program? What do they expect from faculty? What are their professional expectations? If they work, how many hours a week do they work? What is their technological literacy? What technological devices do they own? Do they have to share those devices? Do they have access to the internet? Do they speak English as a second language? What is their ethnic background and what academic experiences have they had? What are their learning styles? What are their cognitive skills? How motivated are they to take a course and what motivates them to take it?

In addition to learning students’ profiles and adapting our pedagogies to meet them where they are at, we must also examine and adapt our pedagogies to address the new professions and workplace practices that have emerged because of the lockdown. Academic programs should stay in touch with professional organizations to identify how professions have been evolving during the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to develop a new curriculum that considers new students’ profiles and how professions are evolving.

Because teamwork remains one of the key elements to workplace success, we need to adapt group work pedagogies that allow students to succeed in the world they live in today. One way might be to design exercises or projects that integrate different courses. The same large group project could produce unique deliverables for different courses. For example, an advertising campaign course could be integrated with graphic design and TV or sound production courses on a project. Students enrolled in the advertising course should be able to interact with others who are preparing themselves in different fields. They should all work together on the same project and then reflect on what it means to develop a project from diverse perspectives and identify the benefits and challenges of working with people from different fields.

A pedagogy of renewal must be grounded in ongoing formal and informal assessment (Bennett, 2017). Students and teachers are navigating uncharted territory. Hence, formal assessment is still important, but conducting informal assessments each time class meets is just as—if not more—critical. For example, I start class by asking how students are doing academically in general and identifying what might hinder their learning on that day. This helps me identify situations that could be competing with their attention and adapt accordingly. Also, I offer online forums for students to ask questions that may arise while they are watching narrated presentations or doing the readings before attending class. Then I have them work complete pre-class exercises that show me what they understand and what we ought to focus on for further clarification during face-to-face in-person class time. I am also considering a digital portfolio assignment for each class I teach and, perhaps, for students to keep developing throughout their journey through the program. Adopting this flipped-classroom pedagogy and conducting constant informal assessments are an example of a pedagogy of renewal I am enacting to engage my post-pandemic

disengaged students. My pedagogical renewal journey has been informed greatly by Dr. Pacheco-Sepúlveda's advice. She provides recommendations from her experience in the next section.

Recommendations From the Academic Excellence Center Director

I became the director of the Academic Excellence Center in August 2020. At the center, we help professors improve teaching and learning on campus. Like most centers at other universities, we offer workshops and webinars throughout the year. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown, attendance at webinars increased 89% as faculty members were migrating their courses to teach remotely. Now that our university is offering face-to-face courses again, I noticed the struggle that faculty members have endured as they return to classrooms because there has been a transformation in the learner profile. Therefore, as a collective, we must look for ways to better educate these post-pandemic students in a constantly changing teaching landscape.

The COVID-19 lockdown "obstructed the entire education system," leading universities and faculty members to utilize more technologies that facilitate e-learning in their classrooms (Kalaichelvi & Sankar, 2021). Since so much work was done at a societal level on computer platforms and apps, new ways of getting the work done were available. Education can benefit from this scenario by incorporating more technologies into the teaching processes. However, I recommend that we concentrate on how we will create a safe environment in our face-to-face classrooms as we adopt technologies in our teaching. With the use of more technology, we should produce practices that: (1) provide equitable instruction and engage all students; (2) provide support for students with unique learning needs; (3) meet students' socio-emotional needs; (4) address the digital divide for families and educators; and (5) adopt anti-racist policies and practices (The Education Trust, NY, 2020).

Educational processes have been impacted significantly since March 2020, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shared guidelines for alternative teaching methods (Kalaichelvi & Sankar, 2021). The transformation of face-to-face courses to virtual ones created challenges, but also brought opportunities for the education discipline. Now that we are returning to classrooms, there is a need to develop new pedagogies, teaching methods or theories of education adapted to the teaching and learning situations experienced during the pandemic, new student generations, and globalization. As we used diverse technologies to teach during the lockdown, moving forward we should consider its impact on education and the development of individuals or digital citizens that can collaborate with others at local and global levels. Thus, Hardman's proposal (2021) on the internationalization of education in the 21st century makes us consider promoting collaborative learning as a dialogical method for developing citizens with digital skills who can become globalized citizens. He proposes to motivate human relationships in educational environments to acquire shared knowledge through these interactions, produced through the cognitive-rational process.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to use new technologies for teaching. Nonetheless, to create safer learning environments, as we integrate more technologies in the classroom, we must continue strengthening security in learning management platforms and applications that enable communication among students and professors. Hence, digital literacy should be developed among students and faculty so we can protect devices, digital content as well as data, and keep our privacy in virtual environments. In addition, digital citizenship education, which entails creating a responsible use of technologies (Buchholz et al., 2020), can be achieved not only through new teaching practices that incorporate technology, but

also with the same learning principles that apply for digital citizenship education (Biseth et al., 2021). The latter form of education concentrates on using technologies responsibly. Furthermore, since we create digital footprints as we communicate online, we must pay attention to the physical and psychological impact that they make on us as individuals. We must also ask ourselves; how do we promote effective digital citizenship among people who have different thoughts or worldviews?

The safe spaces that we create to manage technology must also provide a safe environment for human interactions that allow promoting diversity of thoughts and the inclusion of people from different social groups and cultures. The safety of human interactions can be developed based on the students' profiles that we identify. Thus, as we move forward, it is important to develop intercultural intelligence—"the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world" (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7)—in face-to-face courses that include virtual components since learners or digital citizens are exposed nowadays to more information online. When we integrate face-to-face courses with virtuality, we must also understand how learners behave as digital citizens in the cyberspace, so that discrimination or stereotypes are not perpetuated in educational activities that are carried out in the virtual world.

Final Thoughts

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes to our classrooms and teaching practices. Professors have worked tirelessly, and we already have made a difference. But we believe that, as we move forward, we should also take a moment to acknowledge and congratulate ourselves because we have experienced unthinkable challenges. We demonstrated our resilience. We are now showing our resolve for renewal. The future is there for us; we shall succeed.

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