

## COVID-19, DISRUPTION, AND TEACHING PRACTICES

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*There's time to spare. This is one of the things I wasn't prepared for—the amount of unfilled time, the long parentheses of nothing. Time as white sound.*

*Margaret Atwood<sup>1</sup>*

As a professor, I have always desired more time to write, research, and prepare course content. In the *before*, there never seemed to be enough time in the day to accomplish everything I wanted to achieve. Now, there seems to exist a strange tightrope—more time in the day with too little emotional energy for checking off the to-do items. It turns out that living in the midst of ever-changing academic plans, conflicting medical recommendations, and time spent managing other individuals, coupled with the constant fear of catching, or transmitting, a potentially fatal virus is a heavy thing. It is a blanket you cannot throw off. A disruption. An agitation.

It would be enough to encounter only the pandemic and the consequences of COVID-19 in communities. However, we are simultaneously facing economic uncertainty, job loss, racial unrest, social protests spanning the country, increased poverty, and gaps in education policy that may leave many children and adult learners behind. This is not an exhaustive list by any imagining. These various disruptions seem to be pushing many to their breaking points. How can faculty encourage students when we, ourselves, feel under such increased pressure? Students are facing their own unique “long parentheses of nothing.” This nothing, this “white sound,” involves constant stress, some of which we may share, and some of which we may not fully understand. It is imperative to recognize this intensified stress level and formulate effective ways to respond in our courses.

When my university switched to remote learning in March 2020, I made sure that I sent at least two personal emails to each student individually in both March and April. I wanted to check in on their mental and physical health. I immediately created a SurveyMonkey that gauged their expectations for the rest of the semester, asked for

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<sup>1</sup> MARGARET ATWOOD, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* 69 (Anchor Books 1998) (1985).

their thoughts on synchronous vs. asynchronous learning, and identified any potential obstacles to successfully completing the course online. One of my students was dealing with a parent who had COVID-19. Another student did not have reliable Wi-Fi at home and had to sit in a library parking lot to complete assignments. One student told me she cried when she opened an assignment module for our course and found, instead of a lengthy assignment, a reflection paper asking how she specifically was engaging in self-care to ensure strong mental health. She said no other professor had broached this topic and it meant so much to have someone care for this aspect of her life.

The survey data was very important in how I moved forward in the spring, as well as the summer semester. I modified my Canvas modules and syllabi to be more lenient regarding deadlines. I spoke more of self-care and mental health in my recorded lectures. I also made changes to my online formats. I began teaching Legal Research & Writing in the summer in a synchronous format, where we met via Zoom as a class for a few weeks. It was not ideal. Students were quiet, some stated they were nervous to talk since the Zoom meeting was recorded and posted online, and not every student logged on for the course meeting due to work or family obligations. My answer to this clunky rollout was to obtain more data. I sent out a SurveyMonkey, asking my students to share their thoughts on how to meet course expectations with the outlined student learning outcomes. Overwhelmingly, students wanted to be able to access lectures at their own convenience, rather than meeting together on Zoom. I assigned each student a writing partner from the course to send writing projects to before submitting final drafts to me. I wanted them to rely on each other for revision in their writing exercises and stay engaged with their peers. Student evaluations at the end of the summer semester confirmed that the transition from synchronous to asynchronous was successful.

Because of the various disruptions in the lives of students, I want to make the academic component of their lives as easy to access as possible. If that means their learning about Bluebook citation works best for them at 3 am via Canvas lectures, then I want that avenue available to them. I record all of my lectures anew, before and during the upcoming semester, to ensure I am up to date with any current events I can intertwine with the course curriculum. As legal educators during this time, we must examine the way we have previously taught our courses, and critically analyze what can still work during times of unprecedented stress and what does not.

Though disruption typically has a negative connotation, a positive outcome has been the availability to meet colleagues online and

discuss teaching and research. I have participated in several webinars and meet-ups this summer to discuss legal writing and challenges faced in legal education. I teach at the undergraduate level, so it has been very useful to engage in increased professional development focused on legal writing. I want to be sure I am teaching my undergraduate students what they truly need to be prepared for their future 1L courses.

Another positive outcome has been a tightened focus on empathy in legal education. In Heidi Brown's book, *The Introverted Lawyer*, she discusses the role of empathy in the legal classroom as well as in practice. Empathy is a skill that can be exercised by "listening, being open-minded to someone else's life trajectory . . . and not projecting one's personal biases onto the other individual."<sup>2</sup> As we train students to prepare for careers in the legal profession, we should make efforts to identify how they can be empathetic to future clients and colleagues. We, as legal educators, can introduce empathy as a competency component as we modify how we teach students in the midst of learning within a pandemic. We can still have rigor within the classroom, while emphasizing the importance of empathy. We can build opportunities within the curriculum to reflect on current events and identify ways the legal profession could respond.

This is a good time to encourage students to creatively consider how they can influence change in the face of their individual disruptions, while complying with social distancing mandates. Perhaps your students are passionate about social justice issues. Introduce them to op-ed writing. Perhaps they want to encourage younger students to think about a career in law. Contact school counselors who would schedule Zoom conferences in which K-12 students interested in becoming lawyers can discuss law school with your students. What type of virtual service-learning projects could you assign for students to develop empathy as a professional skill? We must recognize the importance of empathy in the legal profession and reflect that importance at all levels, from syllabi to assignments to testing, for our students.

This new world we face is certainly born of disruption. It has changed the way we work and the way we fill our daily, and nightly, hours. Let us take time to focus on our own self-care and encourage our students to do the same. Our routines may be different, but we can certainly work toward sharpening our professional skills, including empathetic responses to our students and colleagues. There is no need for our "long parentheses" to be filled with nothing. We can

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<sup>2</sup> HEIDI K. BROWN, *THE INTROVERTED LAWYER: A SEVEN-STEP JOURNEY TOWARD AUTHENTICALLY EMPOWERED ADVOCACY* 38-39 (2017).

rest up and then go to work, modifying our teaching practices to meet our students where they currently are. We are all agitated. Let's direct that agitation toward where we want to end up and allow it to propel us forward.