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# Teaching in the Time of COVID-19: Reconceptualizing Faculty Identities in a Global Pandemic

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*Abstract: This essay reflects on the experiences of faculty members at a large public university as they responded to the demand for online learning caused by the 2019 coronavirus disease pandemic. It explores themes of course delivery, assessment methods, and faculty–student interactions and how these themes inform faculty identity. The authors suggest that the disruption to faculty identity created by the pandemic may be a fortuitous opportunity to examine deeply held beliefs about what it means to be a college professor.*

*Keywords: faculty identity, remote learning, synchronous online teaching.*

## Preface

The authors of this piece bring a variety of experiences and perspectives to bear in this essay. Lisa Kurz, principal instructional consultant for non-tenure track development in Indiana University's Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning (CITL), focuses her work on faculty whose role centers on teaching. In one-on-one consultations and workshops with hundreds of instructors of all ranks over more than 20 years, she has provided guidance and facilitated conversations on best practices in course design and classroom teaching. Among her areas of specialization is providing support in both pedagogical best practices and career development for teaching faculty (those not on the tenure track). She is also CITL's assessment specialist and has worked extensively with individual faculty as well as departments and programs across the university, helping them create learning goals and devise methods to assess their students' learning. When the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) broke out, she and her colleagues provided support and guidance for hundreds of faculty suddenly asked to rethink their teaching and move to the online environment.

Eric T. Metzler is the instructional support and assessment specialist at the Indiana University Kelley School of Business. In Eric's more than 20 years in this role, he has consulted with instructors of all ranks, observed hundreds of business classes, and provided broad pedagogical support not only to business instructors, departments, and deans, but also to instructors from across the University. He has taught assessment methods to graduate students and consulted on assessment topics with business faculty in Iraq, South Africa, Jamaica, and Barbados. Eric continues to teach an undergraduate honors-level seminar on consumerism, enabling him to put into practice new ideas about pedagogy that arise from his research and observations.

Katherine Ryan is the director of the business communication area of the Kelley School's undergraduate program, overseeing approximately 40 faculty members. Katherine has over 25 years of teaching experience and has taught a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses. She is an active participant and presenter at pedagogical conferences. During the transition to online teaching effected by COVID-19, she met constantly with instructors to manage the difficult task of teaching business writing and presentations in the online environment.

Indiana University is a public R1 (Carnegie classification) research university located in the college town of Bloomington, Indiana and the home of the Kelley School of Business, a top-ranked public business school. With some 32,621 undergraduate students in the fall 2019 term, the university offered 5,527 undergraduate course sections, 4,882 of which (88.3%) were taught as in-person classes. All other modalities combined accounted for only 11.7% of undergraduate course sections. We see a precipitous change in modality by comparing the 2019 figures with statistics from the fall 2020 term, where the university offered 5,746 undergraduate course sections with only 404 (7.0%) designated as in-person classes. For this term, all other modalities accounted for the remaining 93% of sections, the majority hybrid, synchronous online, and asynchronous online courses.

In July 2020, the three authors hosted two reflective seminars at the Kelley School of Business. The seminars gave the participants time to consider specific questions related to the sudden transition to online instruction, situated specifically in the domains of expected learning, assessment, student engagement and care, and overall global considerations. It proved impractical to gather data directly from individual participants; nevertheless, the authors learned much from facilitating the small groups and plenary sessions where faculty responded and shared their impressions of the semester.

In the spring of 2020, when instruction at our university suddenly pivoted from traditional in-person classes to a variety of online modalities, many faculty were confronted with the necessity of making drastic changes to their normal teaching habits. Gone were traditional lectures delivered in conventional classrooms, where faculty could try to read student expressions to detect confusion or disengagement. Gone, too, were traditional exams, with students in a classroom silently bent over their multiple-choice tests while the instructor or a teaching assistant watched. Even the casual conversations between instructors and students about course content, students' lives, or current events, which had filled the minutes before class began, were gone. The lectures were replaced either by recorded versions uploaded to a learning management system to be viewed asynchronously, or in some courses, by synchronous class sessions held online on the video conferencing platform Zoom. The in-person exams were replaced by online exams taken by students individually, with online proctoring services often replacing human observers. Meanwhile, casual one-on-one conversations became public exchanges.

We have had the opportunity to listen to many faculty at our university as they adapted to and reflected on these changes, and we have identified several themes in their reflections. One common theme articulated by faculty centered on changes in how course content was delivered to students—from the familiar terrain of delivering lectures and facilitating face-to-face activities, to the terra incognita for most faculty of delivering content online. Another theme revolved around how student learning was assessed. In particular, faculty who relied on objective exams were forced to either administer the exams online (and accept the concomitant academic integrity issues), or grudgingly accept alternative methods for determining what knowledge and skills their students had acquired. The third theme we identified involved the relationships and interactions between instructors and students. Not only were the semi-private one-on-one conversations with students now public; faculty were also seeing students in very different contexts and circumstances from what they had previously known.

Interestingly and unexpectedly, complaints and frustrations about technology were a minor theme compared to those outlined above. Faculty told us about technological changes they made:

adapting existing technologies to meet their teaching needs, learning new software, and assisting students in using new technology tools. But these were rarely mentioned as the most important challenges they faced in adapting to online teaching. Most faculty seemed to feel that technology issues were straightforward, compared to the other challenges they faced.

As we reflected on the three themes faculty articulated, we noticed something interesting about them: Together they constitute a substantial portion of how instructors might define their identity as faculty. Until the spring of 2020, experienced faculty inhabited a stable teaching persona, which included knowing the course content cold, standing in front of students to present the content, creating activities and assignments to help students learn, assessing students' knowledge and skills, assigning grades as fair representations of students' mastery, and developing an understanding of who students are and how to interact with them. In the spring semester, almost all of that changed. Knowing the content cold was still true, but everything else was suddenly problematized.

Listening to many faculty from different sectors of the university, we came to realize that the greatest challenge in the transition to online teaching seems to have been something that most faculty did not exactly realize: The pivot to online teaching forced them to change how they understood themselves as professors. In this sudden shift, instructors had to rethink not only what they do as instructors, but also who they are as professors. The themes we identified from our interactions comprise the reimagining of professorial identities. In fact, it may be that what made the transition to the online environment so disorienting and uncomfortable for many instructors was in part the unacknowledged impact of the transition on their mindset and identity as professors (Mezirow, 1991; Passmore, 2014). In this reflective piece, we explore these three themes arising from faculty reflections—content delivery, assessment of student learning, and the faculty–student relationship—through the lens of faculty identity (Abu-Alruz & Khasawneh, 2013; Van Lankveld, Schoonenboom, Volman, Croiset, & Beishuizen, 2017).

Our concepts of faculty identity arose primarily from our combined decades of interaction with faculty in a variety of contexts. They also emerged as themes in our qualitative examination of faculty responses elicited in the reflection seminars we hosted in the spring of 2020. However, when we turned to the literature to examine work on faculty identity, we found confirmation of our notions in the work of Abu-Alruz and Khasawneh (2013) and Van Lankveld et al. (2017), among others. These authors postulated that the teaching identity of university faculty includes subject-area competence, knowledge of pedagogy, and a commitment to teaching that includes an interest in students and concern for their well-being. These aspects of identity correspond well to the themes we identified in our research. In addition, we found support for our findings in the work of Passmore (2014), who described a qualitative study of the teaching identity of nursing faculty, and the impact on that identity caused by a move from face-to-face to online teaching. She used the theoretical framework of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) to describe the impact of the pivot to online teaching as a "disorienting dilemma" that spurred changes in faculty identity, from content delivery expert to facilitator of students' learning. We examine how the pivot to remote teaching and learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected three key aspects of the "faculty-as-instructor" identity: the "sage on the stage" (content expert), the objective judge of students' learning, and the caring, approachable instructor grounding students' college experience.

## Content Delivery

The delivery of content has traditionally been the cornerstone of the college professor's teaching role. After spending years mastering the content and epistemology of one's discipline and also imagining oneself as the future font of knowledge for one's students, it is perhaps natural that university instructors launch into careers where they expect to profess their expertise in front of students, sharing

hard-won knowledge with students by telling them things they do not know. For many instructors, however, the COVID-19 crisis surfaced latent but long-present problems with "telling" pedagogies (i.e., content-heavy lecturing to passive students). It also required abrupt changes in teaching style and modality. The combination of recognizing the shortfalls in the way one has always taught and being forced to teach in new and unfamiliar ways put many instructors in the uncomfortable position of questioning their persona as university instructors. Many were left wondering, How do I see myself as a professional? How do others see me?

Although the structure and goals of the university lecture have changed in its 800-year history (Friesen, 2011), the lecture format has nevertheless remained a telling pedagogy that has persisted in the academy into the 21st century. Whether a means of preserving precious, scarce texts as in the Middle Ages or a means of promulgating detailed, in-depth knowledge and thinking from an expert as inaugurated by Johann Gottlieb Fichte at the University of Jena in the late 18th century (Friesen, 2011), lectures sought to broadcast information, which, until the age of the internet, was scarce and difficult to find. With the arrival of the computer age, however, knowledge became not only easily accessible but also easy to find. Information is plentiful in our time, not scarce, and this reality changes everything. Students no longer need professors to supply information. A simple Google search quickly yields whatever a person is looking for or needs to know. Rather, students today need professors to help them discern what information is reliable, valuable, applicable, or useful. They need professors to show them how to use and apply the information. They need professors to help them think critically about the tremendous amount of information available at their fingertips. Yet, in our experience, even until early 2020—before COVID-19 forced the academy into isolation and learning online—many professors continued to teach as if information and knowledge were scarce. Students endured such teaching, sitting politely in lecture halls, showing "civil attention" (Gannon, 2018), thus enabling instructors to persist in believing that lecturing to passive students was a perfectly acceptable form of college pedagogy. It worked, did it not? The move to online instruction, however, dispatched the myth, as many instructors recognized that long, content-heavy lectures with little student activity or interaction led to extremely low attendance in synchronous online classes. Students realized they could watch the recorded lecture at their leisure without missing a beat. Why spend valuable time in synchronous sessions when there is no value added in their synchronicity?

Thus, painful as it may have been for some faculty to open a Zoom session only to have 5% of their students attend, the sudden shift to the online environment forced faculty to come to terms with the reality that the "sage on the stage" (King, 1993) model of teaching could no longer be defended as effective teaching. This wake-up call may ultimately be a great leap forward for college pedagogy, but it comes with costs. It is painful and difficult to reconceptualize what one does, how one does it, and perhaps most of all, who one is in one's profession. For some faculty these changes have provoked discomfort, frustration, fear, and anger—emotions that have sometimes disrupted the faculty–student relationship.

At the same time, the very behavior that rankled faculty improved the student learning experience. Faculty told us that recorded lectures have enabled students to learn at their own pace, reviewing difficult patches, perhaps fast forwarding through material they already know, and reviewing recordings as they prepare their homework assignments or study for exams. For students, learning in this manner is much more efficient than sitting through a synchronous lecture—whether in person or online. When students use recorded lectures in a way that suits their self-directed learning, we heard from faculty that students view the recordings more than once and ask more questions, suggesting deeper engagement with the course material.

As we reflect on the upheaval to the college classroom wrought by COVID-19, what stands out to us in particular are faculty statements about now having to enact pedagogical practices that instructional consultants and designers have promoted as best practice for many years, if not decades.

College pedagogy classics such as Walvoord and Anderson's Effective Grading (1998) and Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design (2005) have taught us that good instruction begins with good course design. Faculty must begin by determining what students should learn, then how they should be assessed, and finally what content will help students succeed on their assessments. This process produces courses that mitigate against the coverage model, where instructors plan daily lessons based on what they will "cover," effectively allowing students to persist in an immature dualist mindset[1] instead of maturing into college-educated thinkers. Although the "backward course design" model is certainly not new, many instructors told us that when they pivoted to the online environment, applying that structure (i.e., begin with the end in mind) to each day's lesson was essential. Similarly, Walvoord and Anderson's (1998) notion that students should gain "first exposure" at home before arriving to class, which later evolved into the "flipped classroom" of today's parlance (Bergmann & Sams, 2012), became a sine qua non of successful synchronous online classes in 2020. Faculty told us of the importance of asking students to learn the basic content at home and holding them accountable for doing so (Kurz, Metzler, & Rehrey, 2015) so that class time could be used for more productive and engaging learning activities such as processing or applying the content—perhaps in discussions, debates, small writing assignments, problem sets, or other activities. Once again, none of these ideas is new, but the circumstances of COVID-19 teaching foregrounded these well-known pedagogical principles and helped faculty see their importance in ways that no teaching conference, consultation, or teaching seminar ever could.

While we know that backward course design and synchronous sessions featuring active learning are essential for fostering student engagement and producing optimal learning for all students, and underrepresented students in particular,[2] prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, these instructional choices were not widely espoused by college instructors. In our view, the disconnect stemmed from the difficulty of enacting such pedagogies, both operationally and emotionally. Delivering a polished lecture based on disciplinary content is clear-cut and straightforward; it confers a sense of expert control and confidence among instructors. While the professor lectures, students must sit quietly, attending to the content being shared. Planning interactive sessions in which students process information, practice skills, and question assumptions may conversely leave instructors feeling less in control, less sure of the classroom environment, and perhaps even less professional in a world where they are supposed to feel in charge.

Further, teaching strategies that promote processing or practice in class fundamentally change the role of the college professor from repository and purveyor of knowledge to facilitator of student learning, which for many instructors fails to square with the image of university professor honed during the years of preparation for the profession. For many college instructors, the profession is defined by the gravitas, importance, and social position conferred by commanding a presence in the lecture hall, delivering carefully prepared lectures about one's discipline, and seeing students sit silently, attending to the information proffered to the class. Educators know—and have known for decades—that this model of teaching is not nearly as effective for learning as facilitating in-class processing and practice. Yet leaving a telling pedagogy behind in exchange for an interactive model can also equate to shedding a professional role of eminence in order to inhabit a more humble, socially egalitarian position.

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[1] Dualism is marked by the belief that knowledge is fixed, limited, and the domain of the expert (i.e., the professor), whose office it is to tell content to passive students, who must absorb said knowledge (Perry, 1999).

[2] Freeman and Theobald (2020) argued that sessions planned around active student interaction as opposed to passively attending to lecture *disproportionally* help underrepresented minorities and students from a background of poverty succeed in the classroom and persist in their degrees. For Freeman and Theobald, this best pedagogical practice is a much more effective antiracist step than issuing official statements or forming committees, which they consider the equivalent of politicians' "thoughts and prayers."

Hence, perhaps university professors have been slow to transition from instructor as source of knowledge to instructor as learning facilitator because of the high, emotionally charged cost of doing so. Nevertheless, COVID-19 indiscriminately demanded sudden and uncompromising changes in the education sector. Time is precious and Zoom sessions must be focused. Sessions must be organized economically lest students summarily tune out or leave altogether. Students must perceive that the sessions are helping them learn specific skills and knowledge on which they will be assessed. Other instructors explained to us that they came to the realization that pushing recorded lectures off into asynchronous time proved to be an efficient way to flip the classroom. Now, instead of sitting passively while the professor rehashes information already available in the textbook, students must acquire content before class, enabling synchronous sessions to be interactive, experiential, and social. Instead of merely receiving information, students can now hear various viewpoints, solve problems with peers, apply what they are learning, and practice the intellectual moves they need to perform well on the course's assessments and to grow as thinkers.

Instructors also told us that the teaching circumstances of COVID-19 have drawn attention to the necessity of instructing students how to learn more effectively. Instructors came to the realization that most 1st- and 2nd-year students do not yet know what it means to prepare for class; nor do they know how to think critically, ask probing questions, or entertain alternative perspectives. These skill deficits for our 1st- and 2nd-year students are nothing new. They are rarely part of high school curricula and faculty have lamented for decades that generally speaking, students arrive on campus with poor "student skills."[3] What is new is the faculty's realization that for their class to work smoothly, they must actively teach students how to prepare for class, ask interesting questions, think critically, and operate in the flipped classroom dynamic. Faculty have come to the realization they have skin in the game; that is, if professors do not help students learn important student skills, the course will not succeed. One sees here as elsewhere in this essay that COVID-19's gift is how it has helped college instructors see and understand issues that have long been present but latent and perhaps unobtrusive because ignoring them came at no cost.

For faculty and students, making the transition to the online environment has required considerable retooling, and for many it has occasioned a sense of grief and loss—both powerful emotions that human beings like to avoid. For students, it has meant self-pacing and learning on one's own, preparing for class in new ways, attending class in new ways, and perhaps seeing oneself with more agency as a student. For professors, the shift has meant thinking much more about how to structure engaging, interactive sessions where students do most of the work—practicing, articulating thoughts, writing, solving problems, making decision, and more. For many, this change has meant reconceptualizing their professional role, perhaps trading an august, elevated self-concept for a more populist, accessible self-concept, which plays out in their actions: Instead of lecturing on the content of their discipline, professors now run activities, direct discussions, facilitate group work, and ask questions. These are all for the good of teaching and learning, but that does not mean the changes come easy.

## Assessment

Along with content delivery, the assessment of student learning has been a key component of a faculty member's self-concept. In addition to professing their content knowledge to students, faculty members see their role as being judicious evaluators of students' knowledge and skills, using carefully designed assessments requiring students to demonstrate key disciplinary knowledge and

[3] In our assessment work, we hear again and again that so-called student skills are something our students need to improve in order to fully succeed in college.

understandings. They administer their assessments in a way that guarantees academic integrity. The completed assessments allow faculty not only to evaluate their students' work, but also to critique it and offer constructive feedback to help students improve. The entire process conforms with faculty views of their role as instructors, awarding final grades that are reliable and equitable reflections of students' understanding of important disciplinary content. With the pivot to online teaching in the spring of 2020, faculty were confronted with contexts that dramatically violated key assumptions about their assessment strategies. In particular, faculty who used objective assessment methods had to confront issues of the lack of validity as well as the inequity of their assessments. These faculty were left only with troubling questions: Have my assessment methods always been this unfair, this problematic? If I am unable to fairly assess my students' learning, what does it mean for me to say I am an instructor?

In their roles as instructors, faculty understand the importance and the purposes of assessment: to sort students via grades, and to offer feedback. Giving grades is a way of sorting students into categories: those who are excellent, competent, marginally so, or incompetent. This function of assessment is distasteful for many faculty but is seen as necessary because of the centrality of grades in the academy. The second purpose of assessment, giving students feedback about their performance, allows faculty to comment on the quality of students' knowledge and skills and offer suggestions for improvement. This role is typically more appealing (but more time consuming) for faculty than the grading role. But faculty have incorporated both the sorting and the feedback functions of grading into their professional identities as objective judges of students' learning.

The basic methods used by faculty to achieve these purposes are subjective and objective assessments. Subjective assessments ask students questions that have no one right answer, or many possible answers, and allow many possible ways of expressing an answer. They typically take the form of essays and other forms of writing, although in recent years many creative and authentic types of subjective assessment such as complex projects or oral presentations have also become popular. For subjective assessments, the feedback purpose of assessment is primary, as faculty can see students' thinking and give detailed feedback about its quality. The sorting purpose is less important, but its importance has been growing in the past few decades with the advent of rubrics to standardize judgments about the quality of students' work.

Objective assessments ask students questions for which there is a single response or a limited set of correct responses and ask students to choose, or to generate, the correct answer(s). The multiple-choice exam is the prototypical objective test and illustrates the primacy of the sorting function of assessment. Students receive a score on an objective test that indicates how well they learned the content (the sorting function) but typically receive little or no feedback on their performance. Faculty using objective assessments have had to accept this trade-off (an uneasy acceptance in many cases). They may have rationalized their choice because faculty using objective assessments often teach large classes in disciplines that emphasize factual knowledge. In this context, exams that allow (seemingly) reliable sorting of students are worth the loss of an opportunity to provide meaningful feedback. In addition, many large universities need to offer large courses with objective assessments to meet student demand for seats in required courses that are a gateway to desired majors.

An instructor's choice of assessment method is usually based on two factors: the discipline of the course and the size of the class. In humanities and some social science disciplines, students might be asked to demonstrate their understanding of course content through writing or other subjective assessments. In the natural sciences and some professional schools, as noted earlier, assessment is often accomplished using objective exams, particularly in lower division (introductory) courses. And course size has always had an important effect on assessment, in that the larger the course enrollment, the more likely it is that the instructor will have to rely on objective assessment strategies.

As was the case with content delivery, the pivot to remote teaching forced a wholesale change in the assessment of student learning—for some faculty, at least. Faculty who used more subjective assessment strategies told us that they merely needed to make small changes in the timing of due dates, or the specific mechanisms used to submit finished work (giving a presentation in a Zoom meeting rather than face-to-face, for example). But they typically did not perceive a need to rethink their subjective assessment strategies entirely, because these strategies translated well to an online environment.

Faculty who used objective assessments, on the other hand, told us that they felt considerable pressure to rethink their assessment strategies. One primary reason they cited for this pressure was a concern about academic integrity when students took multiple-choice tests online. After the pivot to remote instruction, students took exams without proctoring, in environments instructors could not even see, let alone control. Consequently, there was no guarantee that students' performance reflected what they actually knew and not just what they could search for in a search engine or obtain from an online tutoring service. Or, in the worst-case scenario, it could be that a student taking an objective exam could hire someone else to take the test in their place. Even the use of online proctoring services had problems, as students learned to simply evade the surveillance.

Along with concerns about academic integrity, many faculty expressed to us concerns about the equity of the testing situation and students' access to the internet and reliable technology (Gonzalez, Calarco, & Lynch, 2018). They realized that among the students in their classes might be those who needed to work to support their families; who needed to care for family members; who lacked a quiet place to study or take a test; who did not own a computer; or whose only reliable internet connection was in a public place. They realized that students in certain demographic groups were particularly affected by the pandemic, but that all students were under stress. Video surveillance of students while they took exams could exacerbate that stress and add to the equity issues.

We should point out that subjective and objective assessments, and their associated trade-offs, have been well known for decades (Milton, Pollio, & Eison, 1986; Walvoord & Anderson, 2011). The inequities associated with objective testing have also been well known for a considerable time (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017); they were simply foregrounded by the pandemic and the pivot to remote learning.

The academic integrity and equity concerns required faculty using objective assessment strategies to confront some uncomfortable truths about their chosen assessment methods. They could not continue believing their tests were fair to all their students, because of students' differing access to the space and technology needed for them to do their best. Faculty could no longer ignore the academic integrity issues that threatened the accuracy of the sorting function that is central to objective testing. And faculty who chose to look carefully at the kinds of questions they asked on their objective exams told us that they often discovered that they were testing their students' ability to memorize vocabulary and basic facts, which are easily found on the internet, rather than application, problem solving, and critical-thinking skills, which are not as easily found, and not easily learned.

Faculty using objective assessment methods were faced with few viable choices. Some faculty teaching smaller classes told us that they opted to change to subjective assessments, but that was not an option for those teaching larger classes. The understandable frustration arising from this lack of choice may have come in part from the idea that the entire experience challenged their view of themselves as impartial judges of their students' abilities, capable of recognizing excellence and distinguishing it from mediocrity based on assessment results. It may have also caused some to question the entire assessment process—not only the specific methods but also foundational assumptions about the importance of sorting students based on their (perhaps imaginary) ability to distinguish truly exceptional students from those less so. The fact, not lost on some faculty, that these problems predated the pivot to remote instruction spurred a sincere and uncomfortable reevaluation

(for some) of their identity as instructors. If they were unable to see the fundamental flaws in their assessment methods even though they were experienced instructors, what other fundamental flaws in their teaching might they have missed?

## Faculty–Student Relationships

Beyond content delivery and assessment strategies, the third theme we identified through our experiences and conversations with faculty reflected a particularly profound sense of loss—that of relationships and interactions between instructors and students. Many of us who have long abandoned the "sage on the stage" model for the more collaborative "guide on the side" approach value highly the relational nature of this less hierarchical teaching method (King, 1993). This approach to teaching is fundamental to how we understand ourselves as professors; it defines our presence in the classroom. The transition to online teaching disrupted the connections that enable us to be the caring, approachable, accessible instructors grounding students' college experience that we conceive ourselves to be.

There is a reason professors arrive to their classrooms early, and it is not just to make sure the technology is working or the desks are in place. It is because those 10 or 15 minutes prior to class create an opportunity to interact with students in a less formal, more unstructured way. It is a time to make small talk about the interests and well-being of students. It is a time to bond over common experiences and discover a shared passion for sports, hobbies, or service. These conversations emerge as the first few students enter the room and begin to unpack their belongings. A sticker on the front of a laptop, a book from another class, a wet umbrella—all of these artifacts create an opening for conversation and connection. Even beginning a conversation merely to break an uncomfortable silence is often rewarded with an exchange of information that reveals something about the student that enables the professor to tailor a teaching message a little more effectively. It is the desire to do just that—respond, adjust, reach—that makes connecting with students such an important part of many professors' self-concept. These connections are not so easily made in the virtual world.

In the online classroom, there is no wandering the room, quietly engaging a student who seems to need a supportive ear. There is no light-hearted debate about the basketball game the night before, as the quality of Zoom audio makes voices stumble over one another until everyone awkwardly cedes the floor. On the one-dimensional screen, everyone is part of the conversation, even when they are not. There is no easy way for students or instructors to "catch each other for a minute" before or after class. Our faculty came to realize not only that these opportunities to connect were diminished, but also how important they were in crafting their teaching persona. This added to many professors' discomfort with the online teaching experience.

It was not only instructors' curtailed relationship building with students that contributed to the challenge of pivoting to online instruction. Broader classroom management issues also emerged for many faculty, affecting their ability to feel confident about their role. Both those who rely more heavily on a top-down lecture approach and those who adopt a more democratic approach to teaching and learning felt some sense that the online platform eroded control of the classroom environment.

Consider a few of the most common classroom expectations, from the explicitly stated, "no use of electronic devices unless required for a class activity," to the implicit presumption that students pay attention and refrain from perceptibly engaging in work other than that associated with the class. In a typical classroom, violation of these norms is often easy to spot and fairly easy to correct with a purposeful glance or by closing the physical gap between instructor and student, so as to tacitly nudge the student back to the task at hand. It also remains common for an instructor, when recognizing a side conversation in progress, to offer to clarify information or otherwise refocus the attention of the students involved. Many faculty pride themselves on having mastered this skill of situational awareness

in the classroom, often referred to as "withitness" in educational circles (Emmer & Stough, 2001; McDaniel, Jackson, Gaudet, & Shim, 2009) and a fundamental tenet of effective classroom management. The ability to be "with it" in a virtual classroom is significantly diminished. Even in gallery view and even with all students having their video cameras on (not a guaranteed condition), it is rarely possible for instructors to recognize when students are multitasking and otherwise disengaged, or only minimally engaged, in the learning taking place. For instructors who highly identify with their ability to create and maintain an engaging and focused classroom culture, this was a particularly disappointing realization.

Beyond the relationships and interactions among instructors and students, the transition to online learning also introduced a contextual layer that does not exist in traditional classrooms. That is, teaching and learning moved from neutral, generic physical spaces into students' personal online spaces that often revealed more about status, privilege, preferences, and private lives than they may have wanted to share. As faculty, we have always known that such socioeconomic and access disparities exist, but we have rarely been confronted with them to such a degree. The student Zooming in from the corner of a cramped bedroom or a kitchen table with family members conversing in the background stood in stark contrast to the student Zooming in from the side of their backyard swimming pool or generously appointed den. As such inequalities were not lost on the instructor, neither would they be lost on fellow students who might now consider their classmates from a very different perspective—one that could significantly affect power relationships and how they worked together as peers.

In a similar fashion, many instructors—despite the connections they desire and form with students as part of their professional identity—discovered that they wanted to maintain some degree of boundary between their own work and nonwork lives. The desire to maintain clear distinctions between these different spheres of life has been well documented in the boundary theory literature, with those favoring more segmentation experiencing significant stress when the lines between those areas of life became blurred (Desrochers & Sargent, 2004; Piszczek & Berg, 2014; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas 2005). Instructors who found themselves apologizing for interrupting children or cats in front of the computer screen ranged from feeling as though this was a charming peek into their humanity to feeling agitated and concerned that their virtual environment would detract from their professional presence. In each of these cases and the student circumstances above, faculty–student connections were being made in the online platform, just not the type of connections that were particularly desired.

As faculty in our sessions reflected on the relationships they had attempted to form and maintain during the spring 2020 semester, it was clear that many instructors struggled to comfortably situate themselves in the virtual environment. They were made vulnerable by the disruption to their professional identifies and the genuine loss they felt as their connections with students were diminished or uncomfortably altered. Reimagining these critical interpersonal relationships will define approaches to online learning moving forward. As with content mastery and assessment decisions, these relationships must also be thoughtfully considered with respect to how they contribute to both professional identity and effective teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

For most faculty, the swift and sudden pivot from in-person teaching—and all that it implies—to online instruction proved to be an unwelcome jolt accompanied by feelings of disappointment, frustration, and sometime even anger or despair. Missed were the frequent concourses with students, the energy of the classroom experience, and the well-established routines that shape the professional lives of university instructors. At the same time, the new teaching circumstances placed many faculty

members in the uncomfortable position of questioning their previously well-developed persona as college professors as they were forced to see even the most ordinary parts of their profession in new ways. Teaching content became an area that provoked uncertainty about one's self-concept; assessing student performance led to questions about fairness and validity; interactions with students online left faculty feeling loss acutely and confronted instructors with the socioeconomic inequalities among our students that have real effects on their learning. Perhaps one important response to these many challenges is to acknowledge them so that we can control them rather than allowing them to control us.

We, the authors of this essay, however, prefer to take a more sanguine approach. As noted throughout, many of the insights that faculty derived from struggling with challenges were actually confrontations with issues in higher education that have been around for a long time, sometimes decades. We see these uncomfortable realizations as blessings in disguise, an opportunity visited upon us to rethink some of the basics about college pedagogy, what it means to be a university professor, and how we can offer students an enhanced college experience. If we can but look in the right direction and open our minds to seeing things in new ways, we potentially stand at the precipice of a radical paradigm shift in higher education, a shift not only to course delivery that is radically reenvisioned and student centered, but also in how we see ourselves as facilitators of deep, sustained learning that avails students life's best opportunities and leads them to the hallmark of adulthood—self-authorship.[4]

## Epilogue

Six months having passed since writing this essay, we have now experienced an academic semester (fall 2020) that was planned primarily for remote and hybrid modalities. In other words, unlike the tumultuous spring 2020 semester, where faculty were forced to pivot suddenly to an online environment, instructors, anticipating a computer-mediated modality in advance, were able to structure their courses accordingly. Nevertheless, this foreknowledge did not necessarily yield a sea change in teaching. For many faculty, challenges from the spring 2020 semester persisted into the fall: Many students came to class with their videos off and disengaged from the session; electronic resources and consistent accessibility to reliable internet connections were not available for all students; fair and academically honest assessment remained a vexing problem, especially in large classes; instructors continued to struggle to keep their students' attention during lectures. While the faculty have begun to recognize these and related problems as the new normal, the authors of this essay have recognized that by now the academic community is well aware of the main challenges of remote teaching and learning. And yet, not enough time has transpired for a consensus to develop on best practices to address the challenges. Until such a consensus appears, we have responded with recommendations of flexibility with attendance and other course policies, course design that promotes equity and inclusion, revision of assessment strategies, and intentional development of community in the classroom, among other suggestions. In terms of faculty identity, or how faculty think about their profession, we believe these recommendations, along with the challenges they are meant to address, continue to push college teachers to see themselves in new, sometimes uncomfortable, ways. The jury is still out, but perhaps when we are past the threats of the pandemic we will see a renaissance in college teaching and a new definition of college professor.

[4] Self-authorship can be defined briefly as "the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations." See Baxter Magolda, 2008, p 269.

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