

Sandmeyer – COVID Impact Statement

Facts on the Ground

The COVID pandemic transformed the university first during spring 2020. Over that spring break, all students were sent home (or away from campus), and my classes moved to an online synchronous modality for the duration of the semester. With the approach of the fall 2020 term, the University Administration requested faculty, especially those of us who were teaching predominantly first- and second-year students, to teach in-person, if possible. Since the majority of my students met that criteria, I opted to teach my classes using a hybrid modality. Distancing protocols required alternating attendance. One third of my classes were in person for one day of the week, while the other two-thirds participated synchronously online. No student was required to attend in-person, if they felt uncomfortable doing so. This experiment seemed to work for the first few weeks, but it ultimately proved a failure. Most professors had opted not to teach in-person. So, my in-person students had run to or from their dorm (or apartment or wherever) to attend my class, as mine was their only in-person class. The strain of attending under these modalities was too much for the students, and they slowly stopped attending in-person. I changed to an entirely online synchronous modality after only one month. Spring 2021 was run entirely online synchronously. It was not until fall 2021 that I returned to in-person modality with full attendance, though we were all masked. And this situation remained through the spring 2022.

Impact on Teaching

The immediate impact of the pandemic in spring 2020 was profound. That semester I was teaching PHI100 Introduction to Philosophy having four sections of 25 students each and PHI336 Environmental Ethics having 32 students each. When we moved to an entirely online modality, the impact of this transition was variable on my students. Students from wealthier households who lived in the suburbs or the city had consistent access and, typically, better support systems to help them. First generation students, students from stressed households, and those whose economic station was precarious already tended to suffer manifestly under the strain of the pandemic. Access to consistent Wi-Fi was a real problem, as very many of my students moved back to Appalachia and had poor Internet services in their area. Further, many faculty at UK, themselves, were unprepared for this sort of transition having little expertise working online. The significant online teaching experience I had garnered over the years helped the transition in my classes. My students moved rather seamlessly to an online synchronous modality, as I had already designed my class Canvas portals in such a way as to accommodate this modality. I implemented a simplified grading structure, which consciously avoided penalizing students for poor work accomplished post-transition. Nevertheless, my first- and second-year students, particularly, showed real signs of stress as the semester proceeded. By the end of term, a significant percentage of my class stopped participating. The entire semester was a draining to the core.

One of my greatest concerns this first pandemic semester was for the graduate students assisting me in my PHI100 class. These students taught their own sections one day a week (Fridays), while I lectured the other two days. In response to the fundamental changes wrought by the pandemic, I created redundancies in my lessons to reduce their teaching load. I implemented the simplified grading structure as much for their benefit as for the students. And I set up a schedule of weekly meetings where we could identify problems and discuss strategies and tactics to address these. But the stress of the pandemic was as poignant for them as it was for our students. I essentially created a triage system to assess the health and well-being of my students and assistants, alike; identify those most in need of help, and pinpoint my attention on these.

Since that first emergency semester, the greatest impacts in the classroom have been what I call DEI impacts. I have seen that students with Letters of Accommodation from the Disability Resource Center, especially those whose disability is psychological in nature, experience great difficulties. The continuing pandemic has weakened many students' emotional reserves. Online modalities have impacted those with learning challenges in very palpable ways. A significant reason why I have emphasized the 7 Principles of Universal Design in all my classes (see my DEI statement) is to address these impacts. However, one positive outcome can be seen in my ongoing efforts to create inclusive learning communities in my classes. I discuss this more fully in my Teaching Statement. Suffice it to say here, the pandemic has integrated online education into the classroom as never before. Students now not only understand how to be successful online learners, but they also have come to expect that their classes have significant online modalities built into them. Online discussion forums, flipped classes, enhanced communication tools can be powerful instruments of community building.

Service

The effects of the COVID pandemic have impacted faculty cohesion and the enthusiasm for teaching in profound ways. I have discussed in my Service Statement how I have been motivated by this to establish and develop an Environmental Humanities Initiative here at UK. A fundamental short-term goal of the UK-EHI which I detail in my draft report is the creation of an EHI Community here at UK. The aim of the Initiative is to rebuild the UK community of humanities educators and to restore the enthusiasm of our humanities faculty for interdisciplinary environmental research. We have completed one year of work in this endeavor. While we have some 60 faculty, administrators, and community members signed on to the Initiative, the distancing and masking restraints imposed by the pandemic and the continuing threat of infection by new variants has had a real impact on the progress of this Initiative. We did win a grant from the Cooperative for the Humanities and Social Sciences to organize and put on three EH workshops last spring. However, we were able to produce only one of these workshops. This was planned to be in-person but had to be held online. Consequently, it was moderately attended.

Research

My ability to attend conferences and to present my research has been severely impacted by the COVID pandemic. Apart from the care I had to take for the health of my family, many of the organizations that I most regularly attend simply cancelled their conferences these last few years without an online option.