![Wabash Center — For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion](logo)

Teaching During a Pandemic

Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Earlham School of Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching with Digital Media
May 11, 2020
Tags: online teaching | online learning | teaching during crisis

It was just a few years ago when one of my graduate students lost her mother to a sudden unexpected illness. Despite the abrupt passing, three days later that student returned to class. Like any other day, she opened her laptop and took notes while listening to my lecture. Confounded by her composure, I talked to this student later and let her know that she could take extra time with any course-related work, and that I was giving her authorization to be absent and spend time with family. Yet she did not want to. She told me that being in class made her feel like everything was normal, as if her life was intact and unchanged. As a teacher, and of course, a former student, I empathized with her predicament. For many, school offers more than an education, but a place of community, sanctuary, sustenance, and security.

In a matter of weeks, Covid-19 has radically altered how students are educated around the world. These transformations give us a glimpse of how our education system can and will change—for better and for worse. The pandemic has put students and educators in difficult circumstances, ranging from mere inconvenience to a total loss of one's livelihood. It has also prompted new models of educational innovation that may have a lasting influence on the direction of learning and applications on the Internet.

For myself, and nearly all the other faculty I know, we have been consistently relying on Zoom, a video platform, for online teaching, meetings, and teleconferencing. As the majority of educational faculty have shifted to online teaching, many of us have encountered the issues that come with it. First, we experience the unreliability of video conferencing as Zoom was not prepared for this heavy global usage. It has had to adapt quickly to the exponential surge in

traffic. Second, we cannot ignore the difficulty of teaching online verses being in a physical classroom. Third, is the question of adequate means of evaluations for students and for students evaluating the professors.

As a professor teaching online, I have had my share of difficulties and frustrations. The connection on my laptop has been faulty as I teach via Zoom, so I have resorted to using my phone data to teach rather than Wi-Fi. With the limited screen, I can only view two or three student's faces at a time which isn't the best way to stay engaged while teaching. During class, most students are on mute to cancel out distracting background noise, therefore, I sometimes feel like I am talking to a blank void because of the silence. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for students to concentrate with the plethora of distractions both online and environmentally. In addition, it takes time for them to ask questions or participate in class discussions as they pause to unmute themselves. Furthermore, when the Wi-Fi is slow, some don't have their videos on; it is even harder to teach looking at "blank" faces.

Spontaneity is an important part of learning. Something a professor or a student shares may lead to further and deeper discussions which may not have been planned. This is often difficult to create in front of a laptop where the students are muted and sometimes their videos aren't running. Teaching is about being present, engaging, dialogue, eye contact, body language, listening, and communion, and these cannot be simulated in front of laptop or cell phone.

Videoconferencing ends up fostering instructor-centric learning, rather than multiway interaction which is ultimately collapsed into a one-way communication after a certain number of people join the conference. Looking through the materials gathered by instructional tech groups and learning centers, I see that the resources focus almost entirely on the operational "hows" of technology: recording lectures, making discussions, and examinations. However, it is not adequate to continue the learning-teaching venture. Past the digital connection, is the emotional one, particularly in times of uncertainty and rising anxiety.

Of course, I do not question the shift to online or closed campuses, rather I think about how during periods of fear and anxiety, we must ensure students are not only learning effectively, but also are taking care of their mental health. We professors can provide solace, enrichment, and balance during a mentally and emotionally draining epidemic. Not only do I do my best to ensure that my classes are as positive and entertaining as they can be, but I also bring to attention that I am always available for support. I try to humanize myself and remind myself that so many students have left behind more than academics and classrooms. Above all, it is important for professors to ask our students what we can do to help them. In times of uncertainty, we can do our best to create space where students' ideas and individual voices bring light to one another, as they do for us.

While there is a surplus of uncertainties during this time, what we can be sure of is that Covid-19 has become the catalyst for educational institutions to explore new solutions in a short period of time. The question of student evaluations, therefore, needs to be seriously reexamined. With students under higher stress levels, educational institutions need to rethink

how students are graded. With campus shut-downs, many libraries are closed and digital books and journals are limited. In the context of major world panic, economic alarm and growing illness, our students should be given leeway not just academically, but financially.

Presently, we are seeing students and solution providers welcome the "learn anytime, anywhere" concept of online education. we have been reminded that the way of the future is through a range of mediums. Conventional in-person learning will be accompanied by novel education modalities, from live broadcasting, to virtual reality, to educational influencers akin to social influencers. We are finding that learning can be a practice integrated into daily routines, becoming a true 'lifestyle.'

The rapid spread of Covid-19 has forced us to challenge ourselves and build resilience from incalculable threats, challenges, and insecurities. We must use this pandemic as an opportunity to remind ourselves that the skills we must impart to students in an unpredictable world include sophisticated decision making, creative problem-solving, and most importantly, adaptability. We do this to build resilience in them, and the future we help them create.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/teaching-during-a-pandemic/