

COVID Keepers: How the Pandemic Can (and Should) Transform College Teaching

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic thrust higher education into the seemingly overnight shift to remote instruction. The drastic increase in online offerings expanded course accessibility in ways that we never imagined, especially for students with disabilities. As we continue to adapt and shift to more hybrid and in-person interactions, it is crucial that we reflect on the insights and lessons that we have learned during this era and examine what we should retain even after the pandemic has become endemic. This paper synthesizes the observations, pedagogical strategies, and perceptions of two associate professors at a mid-size, public university in the northeast United States, State University of New York Brockport, who shifted from in-person, synchronous instruction (pre-COVID) to fully online, asynchronous formats in the 2020–2021 academic year. We explore lessons learned and offer suggestions for preserving the approaches that resulted in improved course accessibility and flexibility. *What are our COVID keepers?*

Keywords: college teaching, students with disabilities, COVID, remote teaching

In March 2020, COVID-19 forced higher education into the seemingly overnight shift to remote instruction and as the months have turned into years, it is clear that we will likely never return to pre-pandemic circumstances. As we transition and adjust to more hybrid and in-person interactions, we are struck by how much this pandemic has thrust us into new realms of course and educational accessibility that just a few years ago never seemed beneficial, or even possible. As faculty at a teaching institution, at the forefront of our minds is what we have learned about teaching and access during this time. Reflecting on the measures we put in place to modify our courses and help our students learn in virtual formats, we are now considering which aspects should stay even after the pandemic is behind us. It is imperative that we do not lose the lessons and insights that we have learned during this time. To that end, this paper contains insights and reflections of two associate professors at State University of New York Brockport who taught in asynchronous online formats for the 2020–2021 academic year, in courses that previously were mainly in-person and synchronous. We examine what we have learned from this era and what should stay after its conclusion. *What are our COVID keepers?*

Before we explain what we are keeping and why, it's important to first understand the immediate and longer-term changes that we made in our teaching as well as the immediate and longer-term impacts on our students' learning. As veteran educators, perhaps we had become a bit complacent in our pedagogy because it just felt familiar and good. We liked our pre-COVID teaching strategies—a lot. We really didn't see any need to change them. But that decision was not ours to make. In one hot minute back in March 2020, the world pivoted (to use a now tired term), and, ready or not, we were suddenly fully online professors. It was difficult, but we were educators and had a job to do so we learned how to make it work. Sometimes it worked well, sometimes it was a disaster, often it was somewhere in between; but throughout all of this sometimes painful learning, we have changed. Yes, we (still) much prefer face-to-face interaction where we can experience the personal nuances such as facial expressions, organic

and spontaneous discussion, and actually getting to know the face/name/voice combination of the humans that we are teaching, but we have learned that we can, in fact, teach online. As educators, we know that learning requires one to figure out how to assimilate new (possibly contradictory) information into our schema to create opportunities for new understanding and COVID made that imperative in our pedagogy.

In March 2020, we quickly learned that there was a chapter missing from the proverbial “How to Be a College Professor” textbook: specifically “What to do when you are in a pandemic and your online students are in various states of crisis and they are struggling with mental health, physical health, childcare, employment, housing, technology, politics, racism, homophobia, ableism ... and they can’t seem to get their work done.” Chapter Abstract: Zero tolerance never works. Find the balance between empathy and rigor. Listen, flex, support, hold them accountable, hold high standards, but provide opportunities for redemption. Teach. Excuse me while I respond to the students in crisis and then send out a few mass emails explaining the importance of communication, time management, self-care, and personal responsibility so that this week will be better than last week. It wasn’t as simple as flipping our courses to online formats; it was complicated, messy at times, and in many ways, a fundamental shift in college teaching. Out of this struggle came growth and innovation for both the students and ourselves.

Previously, when asked to consider providing more online programming, our resistant argument had often been that we simply can’t have students learning everything remotely. That what we do in brick and mortar buildings simply cannot be reproduced or replaced by remote activities. Although we value in-person instruction, we have realized that this was a privileged stance that prioritized our desire to teach live in classrooms (in often inaccessible buildings and classrooms and at inconvenient times) over our students’ ability to access our instruction. I (Ashton) certainly made that argument; in fact, when we were asked to make one of our new teacher education programs have an entirely online option my department collectively refused. We argued that field experience and meaningful interactions could not happen without students being physically present in our classrooms and in the field. Well, now I’m a liar. Because for over a year, my department has been providing fully online programming (yes, including methods courses and field experiences) to all of our students. Apparently, we can do this remotely. We just didn’t have the proper motivation. The ableism in this is literally oozing out of the seams of the very programs we created to make for better inclusive educators.

What did we see in our students during the remote COVID-19 era? Some students absolutely thrived in the asynchronous structure of remote instruction. Tasks, deadlines, software applications, text-heavy interactions, independence—that almost video game-like interaction just clicked with some students and they were almost unbelievably efficient and danced their way eloquently through the semester. However, those same tasks, deadlines, software applications, text-heavy interactions, and need for independence elicited a very different reaction from other students. Without the personal classroom interactions where a student could see/hear/discuss/question in real-time with their classmates and an actual human professor, it all seemed like they were thrown into a random chaotic mosh pit and they were not sure that they would actually make it out alive. Of course, there were many students in between.

When the pandemic began, many colleges and universities significantly restricted physical operations and shifted to remote work and education, even in jobs/majors where this had until recently seemed impossible. One of the first things we realized is that, once hosted online, our courses became more universally accessible to many of our students. This shift has arguably had the largest impact on people with disabilities for whom access (physical and digital) has consistently been a challenge, and often a barrier, to educational and vocational participation and achievement. Additionally, post-traditional students, those who work or care for family members full-time, benefited from a course schedule with numerous options for online classes. Moreover, many students who do not identify as disabled or post-traditional also found the shift to remote instruction to be quite complementary to their learning and/or lifestyles. Though online teaching and learning doesn't automatically result in 100 percent accessibility (as measures still need to be taken to make digital content accessible), it certainly (and at least temporarily) eliminated barriers and constraints that were cumbersome for some students. If something is working well, it makes sense to find ways to continue and even possibly expand those practices, and this is where the work of this paper is focused.

Accessibility During COVID—Improvements and Challenges

The rapid shift to online learning improved access for many students with disabilities (SWD), a population for whom access has been a perennial and sometimes insurmountable challenge. Courses that at one time we felt were not appropriate for online instruction were suddenly accessible remotely. Without having to be physically present in a classroom, many SWD were able to choose if and when they would disclose their disabilities to their peers, thus reducing stigma. Prior to the pandemic our institution utilized an in-person paper-only system for notifying instructors about a student's need for disability accommodation that sometimes created awkward conversations about their disability that students had to navigate. The shift to remote instruction necessitated an institutional shift to an online notification system for instructors that eliminated the need for students to engage in these conversations in person. Recently, we helped to facilitate a panel of SWD who spoke at length about how remote learning has benefited them. They spoke about not having to travel across campus to get to their classes or navigate obstacles in classrooms that limit physical accessibility. They also highlighted the accessibility features of online lectures and resources that were not readily available in face-to-face instruction. Online administration of exams also meant that SWD could get accommodations such as extended time and reduced distraction environments without having to take the assessment in an alternative setting (potentially outing them to other students) or to miss classroom instruction.

This does not, however, mean that the shift to online learning resulted in perfect accessibility for all students. Data gathered in the early stages of the pandemic during Spring 2020 from higher education professionals that work with SWD found that there were still significant barriers in the pandemic transition (Scott & Aquino, 2020). Participants indicated that SWD experienced similar challenges compared to their non-disabled peers, but these challenges tended to occur more frequently. "Three areas presenting more frequent difficulty for students with disabilities included access to the network/Wi-Fi, access to course assessments or exams, and communication with instructors" (Scott & Aquino, 2020, p. 2). Since this data was collected during the semester of rapid online transition, one would hope that these challenges reflected the

reactive and abrupt approach taken and were addressed and minimized in the past two semesters when instructors had more time to proactively prepare to teach effectively online. In fact, follow up data collected by the same authors in January 2021 indicate that there was improvement: “Almost half of higher education professionals reported that access had improved in areas related to technology including having needed equipment and devices, assistive technology programs, and network/Wi-Fi service” (Scott & Aquino, 2021, p. 2).

However, Scott and Aquino’s (2021) findings in other areas were less promising with mixed findings regarding SWD’s ability to access counseling services as well as food and housing, with some respondents reporting decreased access in these areas compared with Spring 2020. “Similarly, a majority of survey respondents reported improvement in their communication with faculty but nearly one third indicated that communication with faculty related to classroom accommodations (29%) and inclusive course design (37%) had not improved or had worsened” (Scott & Aquino, 2021, p. 5). Participants also reported that, as a result of the shift to online learning, there was a greater awareness of and emphasis on the importance of pedagogically sound online teaching and digital accessibility. Some campuses even implemented new policies on matters such as attendance and video captioning that increased accessibility at their institutions. What remains to be seen is how much of this will remain post-COVID.

The removal of some of those barriers has also increased access to other populations of students such as post-traditional students who tend to be enrolled in blended and online programs (Aquino & BuShell, 2020). Post-traditional students are generally considered those who are age 25 or older, have dependent family members, and work full-time while enrolled in coursework (American Council on Education, 2020). It is also important to note that increasing access also serves to benefit the population as a whole, as there are individuals who do not identify as disabled (or otherwise qualify for Americans with Disabilities Act accommodations) or post-traditional, but for whom these changes in accessibility have been very beneficial. The idea that learning environments could and should be structured to meet the various strengths and needs of an increasingly diverse learning population is a foundational concept in Universal Design for Learning (Nelson, 2021) and will be discussed in the next section.

Online access opened doors for people with disabilities and post-traditional students that had been firmly closed just months before. Though remote participation at work and/or school has been a frequently requested accommodation in the past, the answer has often been “no” with the rationale that such accommodations would require too much effort and financial resources (Beery, 2020). Yet, it happened! And it benefited more than just people with disabilities and post-traditional students. It is notable that while these changes created dramatic improvements in accessibility and equity for SWD, they resulted from a need to accommodate all students in virtual formats, rather than a concerted attempt to combat ableism. We are now at a crossroads—will this access continue or will the shift back to in-person eliminate the remote access that has benefited so many?

Teaching and Learning During the Pandemic

Improving access to learning environments for all students is not a new concept, but certainly the COVID-19 pandemic has shed a new, perhaps broader, light on this often-overlooked topic. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a strong framework for understanding how and why we should create student-centered learning environments that eliminate barriers to meet the needs of a wide range of learners (Nelson, 2021). As a research-based framework, UDL is based on three key principles that push us to remove barriers by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to our students. UDL seeks to remove physical, curricular, and technological learning barriers, so that the goal of the lesson is achieved by all students while maintaining rigor and high standards. Whether we intended to implement UDL at the onset of the pandemic or were simply trying to provide access to our courses, examining these changes using the UDL framework illustrates that we have already made many great strides to improve our courses for all students. UDL is not a one-size fits all approach; rather, it is a framework that consists of a variety of principles, guidelines, and checkpoints that foreground increasing access and can easily be integrated into your instruction. Nelson (2021) implores those just beginning to implement UDL to choose those aspects that complement their pedagogy best and then slowly build in more intentionally accessible design as you become more experienced. The shift to online instruction provided many of us with a solid foundation upon which we can continue to improve access by building UDL into all aspects of our pedagogy. Although this is not a discussion on how to implement UDL in a post-COVID world, it is an exploration of how changes made during the pandemic in terms of access are desirable, beneficial, and progressive in this necessary shift in higher education. If nothing else, this is a sound rationale for not simply going back to the way we used to do things, as that would reintroduce barriers and roll back progress that we have made during the pandemic.

Although UDL can help frame the pedagogical decisions that we made, not all changes fit that framework. As instructors we needed to ensure that all students had access to what they needed to be successful, but some decisions were more reactive than proactive, as we responded to situations that were new and unanticipated. Course materials and modules were provided upfront and the students who were most comfortable with asynchronous remote instruction jumped right in and got started. Since many instructors were learning how to manage remote learning environments in real time, these students were quick to ask clarifying questions and point out when a module was not viewable or when all of the appropriate documents were not posted. This helped everyone else in the class because mistakes were caught early and fixed. These students often completed assignments early, easily meeting course deadlines; however, those same assignments were indecipherable to other students who were struggling to find their rhythm in the fully online environment. Working with them was more complex and required the mindset of “How can I help you understand what I’m asking you to do?” For some, frequent and lengthy one-on-one online meetings were needed, so that’s what we did. There were, of course, others in between for whom a little redirection and some carefully planned partner/collaborative work seemed to do the trick.

We learned a lot this past academic year about both teaching and learning. No matter the content, learning requires us to figure out how to assimilate new (possibly contradictory)

information into our schema to create opportunities for new understanding. This is essentially what we all should do as educators for our students. The pandemic pushed us out of complacency and into a space of dissonance where many things just didn't feel right. We planned as best we could, we erred, we corrected, we persisted, and we learned about ourselves. However, we also learned that online instruction benefited many students, and some things were actually better when we did them online. We learned that there are aspects of online instruction that for some topics are much more effective/efficient than in-person instruction. Conversely, we also learned that some in-person activities really don't translate well to online activities.

Teaching Activities During COVID

Recorded Lectures and Assignment Instructions

When I (Sniatecki) began teaching fully online courses in Fall 2020 (as opposed to shifting in-person courses rapidly online like I did in the spring), I spent a lot of time and energy creating recorded lectures and assignment/rubric overviews. I worried about whether I could engage students in the same way through recorded lectures, especially since all of the literature I had read on the subject indicated that students' attention faded very quickly when reviewing recorded materials. A presentation recording application was used, so they could see my face as well as the PowerPoint presentation and/or documents that were being discussed. Though I made strenuous efforts to keep the recordings short and concise, most were 20–30 minutes in length. The existing research would suggest that this is too long (Guo et al., 2014), but my students resoundingly disagreed. Much to my surprise, students in my courses consistently commented about how much they enjoyed the recorded lectures, and some even asked for more! Though this contradicts some of the research on online teaching best practices, this will be retained in my post-COVID repertoire. Recorded lectures/instructions are infinitely more accessible for students with and without disabilities. The programs commonly used for these products offer capabilities such as captioning and screen reading abilities that greatly expand the ways in which students can interact with course material. They can also pause, rewind, watch multiple times, etc. and no one misses the course material due to being absent from class. The same applies to assignment instructions and other guidance. Using recorded lectures can also free up time for active learning activities (Prunuske et al., 2012). I've been doing that in my hybrid course this fall, and it's really enhanced the learning experience. I make space for clarification of content and questions at the beginning of our in-person meetings and then we move into experiential activities. It's made me focus much more methodically on how I am using class time and which activities are most engaging and central to course objectives. In other words, what's essential for us to do in-person?

One of the most salient "aha" moments this year occurred when I created a recording to teach students how to cite a professional journal article in APA style. This is something that I had been doing in class (in person) for at least ten semesters. After this was completed, it was so obvious to me that it should have been done years ago! Not only does it save time in class, but students can refer to it when they have questions, and again, students can watch it over and over if they need to. It can also be used for multiple classes, students completing independent study projects, training research assistants, etc.—all from one recording! These are things that I've

continued in this academic year (at the time of writing). Posting these items for students to review outside of class frees up valuable time for discussion and activities in our time together in class. I can't tell you how many times I have referred students back to these videos when they email me with questions—another huge time saver!

Virtual Office Hours and Meetings

Virtual office hours are more accessible for some students, and faculty as well. There is no need to travel, which can minimize physical accessibility challenges and transportation issues. Students also save time without needing to travel to a space to meet in person. That's not to say that some might prefer to meet in the office, face-to-face, but this might not be the case for all students. Virtual meetings also allow participants, especially people with disabilities, to be in their own (hopefully) comfortable space with access to the supports and facilities that best suit their needs. These changes work better for me (Sniatecki) as well! I can take meetings on the days that I work from home connecting with students in virtual spaces and accomplishing the same tasks that we would do in person. Now I am back to fully in-person office hours, yet students continue to seek online meetings much more frequently than they did in the past.

Anecdotally, this may also be the case for other types of meetings. We are both involved in a large campus-wide committee and noticed that attendance at this year's virtual meetings has been robust, and higher than we experienced in previous years. We suspect that this is due, at least in part, to the virtual format. Members don't have to travel across campus, or from another location to attend. I can't help but wonder why on earth we all walked halfway across campus during snow and rainstorms to meet one another in the student union in years past. We also have a wheelchair user in the group, so again—why were we even doing that? There's that implicit ableism poking up again. There is also less concern about being disruptive if you need to arrive late or leave early, which likely precluded some attending in the past. We have all certainly skipped meetings in the past when we were going to be significantly late (often due to attending to a pressing student issue) and were concerned about how that would be perceived. Logging in late seems much less obtrusive. The same has held true for events that the committee has planned and hosted. One recent speaker event had over 100 attendees, including an entire class that was being conducted in-person and streamed in.

Discussion Boards vs. In-Person Discussions

Discussion boards were used extensively in my 2020–2021 courses to foster discourse and student interaction in online asynchronous classes. For me (Sniatecki), it raised the issue of in-person versus virtual discussions—which is better? What I observed is that one of the major things missing in the discussion board approach is the emotionality and impact that can happen in the traditional classroom setting. Hearing another student speak from their own experience can be very profound for other students. Additionally, all students are present for the discussion that takes place. Online, few students are likely to read all the discussion board posts/responses from their classmates, thus they are only privy to pieces of the discussion. I certainly observed this in my classes by examining the views for each post. That said, a major advantage is that *everyone* participates, whereas in the classroom, we rarely hear from every student. In addition,

the anxiety associated with sharing personal experiences and/or perspectives is minimized in an online forum for many students. They often write more well-developed, thoughtful posts as compared to the comments that occur in the classroom. I also noted that part of what has made these forums successful is using the setting that prevents students from seeing others' posts before they write their own. This significantly cuts down on the repetition and regurgitation of ideas I remember from graduate school where it was clear (to me at least) that many (most?) students hadn't done the readings. They were simply repeating the points of previous posters with slight revision. This year, I'm attempting to use both with the intent to capitalize on the advantages mentioned. The class is now hybrid, and each week, we engage in face-to-face discussions and activities during our weekly meetings related to course content and students also respond to one discussion board prompt each week. It seems to be working well! There are evaluation components related to both online and in-person participation which also give students more avenues to display their knowledge and actively participate in the discussion, even if they are not comfortable verbalizing their thoughts in the classroom (a foundational ideal of UDL).

Concluding Thoughts

Over the time since COVID-19 entered the educational landscape, we have had numerous discussions about if/how this era will shift our students' openness and enthusiasm about online classes. In the past, students have selectively opted into online learning, and our existing knowledge and best practices are based on these students. COVID required all students (and professors), many who had never considered online learning before, to engage remotely and it appears that many were surprised by their experiences. We have witnessed a sharp divide on this issue in our own classes. Some students really struggled with online learning and deeply missed the in-person interactions and connections. Others have found that they love this format and have expressed a desire for additional online classes. They've told us how flexibility allows them more opportunities to work, attend to their family's needs, work at their own pace, etc. As instructors, we have observed that students do their work at all different points in the week in asynchronous classes. Some work at 8:00 am, others at 3:00 am, and others just before the 11:59 pm deadline (this will never change!). This leads us to wonder if we have created a whole new generation of online learners, many of whom may have different needs and expectations than what is reflected in the professional literature. It remains to be seen how many of these students will choose to continue in online formats or if universities will continue to provide significant offerings of online programming, but this could imply distinct shifts in that population from what existed pre-COVID. Many of my students who balked at online courses in 2019 are now asking for them, and some seem frustrated by our rush back to mainly in-person offerings. It also means that the literature on online learning may be completely outdated, since it's based on those that chose online instruction voluntarily.

Arguably, there have been many advantages from the shift to remote instruction. It is essential that we recognize that this shift was made virtually overnight to accommodate the largely non-disabled populous who suddenly needed educational access from a remote location. Approximately 25 percent of our population would identify as disabled in some way (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020) and we know that the education and employment

statistics for this demographic are not great. Disabled students and employees struggle to find success in an incredibly ableist structure that has historically created significant physical and institutional barriers.

We Shouldn't Go Back, and Here's Why

Why shouldn't we go back to the way things were? Because it is ableist and exclusionary. We have learned that a remote option has created access not only for our disabled students but also for students who work full-time and/or support family members. "But the window is still open to make accessibility permanent, ideally under the guidance of people with disabilities, who used online tools out of necessity well before they became universal" (Beery, 2020, More Options for Now section).

Necessity is the mother of invention. We needed to figure out how to function remotely because the world paused and we were all sent to quarantine. We adjusted rapidly and created access in ways that had been deemed impossible before. But, as we return to in-person instruction and activities, we face the temptation to go back to the way things were. We've heard the "back to normal" rhetoric repeatedly and while on the surface this seems like a good thing—is it really? In this era of questioning problematic marginalizing institutional practices and promoting equity, inclusion, and social justice, if we go all the way "back," we would be the biggest hypocrites imaginable. If we go back, it shows that we don't value the experiences of disabled people and people who have multiple full-time responsibilities. It implies that they don't belong in higher education. It means that we are actively choosing to retract the accessibility advantages that online instruction yielded. It also means that we have learned nothing.

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