

Letting Go of Rigor Anxiety During a Pandemic

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

As I prepared my course for the fall, a professional writing course for law students that I usually teach in person but now teach remotely, I took special care to consider the mental health of all of my students. As I planned, the first thing I did was write “Scale Back” at the top of the page of my plans for the semester.

Under the conditions of this pandemic, we have to change how we think about our students’ learning. Of course we do. But in the discussions I’ve had with professors, I’ve heard a lot of this: “We must preserve rigor in this new remote environment.”

As though by not being in the physical classroom, our students are basically going to party all of the time.

Now, I teach law students, a group of students particularly prone to *not* partying all of the time. (I was one; I remember.) Instead, law students are prone to *worrying* all of the time. In fact, law students have one of the highest rates of anxiety and depression of all student groups in the United States, hovering around one-third.

But undergraduates and graduate students in other fields also suffer from depression and anxiety with increasing rates during this pandemic. Rigor is a red herring. We need to worry about our students surviving with their spirits intact. We need to worry about them surviving.

‘Deficit Mentality’

This talk of “preserving rigor” has to do with what **Dr. Lee Skallerup Bessette**, a learning design specialist at Georgetown University, calls a “deficit mentality” about online teaching. A deficit mentality means that a person always thinks about online teaching as a poor substitute for in-person teaching.

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Skallerup Bessette instead argues, “As you prepare for the fall, it is your responsibility to resist defeatist narratives and approach online teaching, not from a deficit mentality, but from an openness to its potential.” Online education has its own benefits to offer our students, different benefits from traditional in-person learning. As administrators and professors, we need to adjust our mindsets and be willing to figure out what those benefits are.

It’s All Rigorous

When I wrote “Scale Back” at the top of my course plans, I did so because I knew one thing to be true: Every single thing my students are going to do for my course this fall is going to be twice as hard as it usually will be. Getting textbooks? There’s no bookstore, and shipping is slow. I know from my own publisher that book production itself is slow—literally printing and gluing books together is taking longer than usual. I can’t imagine starting law school without my books, but many students will be doing just that. I hear from colleagues and publishers: “But they can just use online versions for now. They’re

used to digital stuff.”

No—that’s completely unfair.

Asking students to embrace an entirely different mode of reading, note taking and engaging with their learning materials means asking them to work more slowly. However, they will *learn* from the experience. Learning to engage with digital materials will be rigorous, just in a different way than you were expecting.

Think about it: Is it faster for you to open your classroom door or to open your Zoom classroom? (Note: Learning to use Zoom and other cloud meeting software is also a useful skill—it is also rigorous.)

Everything that is harder for you right now is also harder for them, though there is one big difference: You aren’t being graded based on your technological competence. You might *think* you aren’t grading your students based on theirs. But you are, especially if you are expecting them to do the exact same work this semester as they would have done last year.

You also aren’t being graded when your dishwasher breaks, your toilet overflows or you get a flat tire. Just like you, your students are experiencing these everyday disasters. Remember that it’s so much harder to fix these problems right now, because everything, literally everything, is harder.

Go Deeper, Not Wider

You need to redesign your course from the ground up, and administrators need to encourage their professors to do so. You can’t take an in-person class and put it online. Online teaching is a different type of teaching. Clinging to your old syllabus might seem like less work for you—and it truly might be—but it is more work for your students. And there will definitely be less learning.

This fall, I cut my writing assignments in half for my third-year writing seminar. First, rather than having them write pages and pages of new writing, I’m having them write fewer pages and revise more of them. Second, I’m having them work in cohorts and read and comment on one another’s work every week. By doing so, they’re going to learn how to give and receive feedback. (I will teach them how to do so.) They will also be in small groups, groups who will keep an eye on one another. I’m also giving more individual feedback as a way of maintaining contact with each student.


By writing fewer new things and revising the work they’ve written after working closely with their cohort members and with me, I’m having my students go deeper, not wider, with their material. After I revised the syllabus to create this new model, I had an epiphany. I should have been doing it this way all along, remote or not. They are learning more about writing. The course is *more* rigorous—even as it works better as a remote course.

And that’s the most incredible part of this entire experience of transitioning to remote teaching for me. My

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We need to worry about our students surviving with their spirits intact.

Her two oldest children recently graduated from Arizona State. Cavalier credits the school with where she is today. "ASU took a risk [on me]," she says. "They said, 'We love the work you're doing with Science Cheerleaders and citizen science.'

"They created this job for me." Taking risks is how "change happens," she says. 

Analyzing Hidden Privilege in the Academy, *continued from page 9*

The Privilege of Tenure


Working on her latest book while coming off maternity leave for her second child, Calarco discovered that she had already posted to her Twitter account many of the manuscript's resources. She likes Twitter for junior faculty and graduate school students who can find out things without having to ask senior faculty or colleagues.

But her work on inequality has caught the attention of online trolls who have posted threats to her and her family. "I don't mind debating ideas," she says, but dealing with the trolls "does make it harder trying to put ideas out in the world."

Calarco balances her active life that includes a three-year-old and a first-grader thanks to the support of her partner who works in technology. "We're figuring it out," she says, the "it" being working from home during the pandemic.

Among women in the academy, Calarco sees herself as being in "a privileged position." As a tenured, white, associate professor at a Research 1 school with research funding intact and female professors outnumbering their male counterparts in the sociology department, Calarco understands she's in a unique situation.

Her department head is a woman, and there are other women administrators in the chain of command. Calarco admitted that having women in positions of power changes things, including the department culture, conversations around family leave and workplace flexibility.

Women leaders recognize the "care burden on mothers," she says. They're thoughtful in their approach and mindful of the balance all women faculty seek. 

Unique Fellowship Recognizes Doctoral Students and Their Mentors, *continued from page 11*

color.

Fellows receive professional development, including leadership training that is based on the social change model of leadership: What's best for society? There have been speakers on professionalism and ethics. They're able to take part in the science investigator meetings. This year, someone will speak on mental health and well-being, and there are funds to cover the cost of mental health and well-being expenses.


"There is an educational allowance that is intended for them to use for memberships to scientific societies, attending scientific society meetings and enrolling in advanced

science courses," says Zárate. "Those are the types of opportunities that the students have in addition to being brought together to build community."

There are opportunities to present at the HHMI annual meeting and an allowance to attend non-HHMI professional events. Parents are allowed to bring infants, and there are funds for a caregiver at HHMI and non-HHMI meetings.

Zárate, who has a Ph.D. in molecular, cell and developmental biology, says in their education and postdoctoral training, scientists are often encouraged to be "objective and one-dimensional"; otherwise, scientists could bias the work that they're doing. Bringing in people's experiences doesn't dilute the science.

"Part of what we're doing is trying to remind the advisers that they themselves are cultural, human and complex," she says. "Once the adviser really thinks about it in the context of mentorship, they will be able to engage with their mentees as complex beings. When you take a whole person into consideration, people feel included.

"It's not about having advisers learn about every other culture. It's about them seeing themselves as cultural beings." 


PROFILE: Valian Explores What It Takes to Build an Inclusive Academy, *continued from page 12*

a diverse faculty yields.

"To whatever extent we can, we try to back things up with solid information that comes from observation and experimentation," says Valian. "The second half of the book is organized around how to think about changing things in the university. Each chapter ends with a set of recommendations."

There are two chapters on hiring, discussing everything from the language used in the job ad to how to go about constructing a short list of candidates. There is also discussion about the interview. Valian says they try to make visible to people all the areas where there is a choice about how to structure things.

"We focus on changing policies and procedures," Valian says. "There is less room for personal impressions to play a role and there's more room for solid decision-making.

"We try to figure out how you can really make the playing field even." 

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teaching, *all* of my teaching, is getting better.

I've also gained even more empathy for my students. After all, my dishwasher just broke. It's been two weeks, and our new one still hasn't been delivered yet. I am fresh out of child care for my elementary school-aged children. Everything is twice as hard as it should be.

And yet, during this time of duress, I've improved my course for the better, and not just better for now, but for the future too. 