

# The Bad and the Great: Another COVID Semester

By Katie Guest Rose Pryal

Two events occurred recently that have made me want to reflect on my teaching and how we, as a teaching and learning community at large, have been treating our students in this most unusual semester.

First, a social media post made the rounds containing a screenshot of an email from an instructor to a group of students. One of the students posted it online (with identifying information removed). The email stated, essentially, that students in the class were asking too many questions, and that if students asked any more questions, their grades would be penalized.

The student was horrified and hurt by the message, and the feedback on social media was, thankfully, similar.

The second event was a conversation between me and another higher ed worker—another former professor with 10-plus years of teaching experience—talking about how some elementary-school-aged kids are being treated by their teachers in our new remote-learning public school environment.

Together, we hit the same points as though we were singing the lyrics of a song that we both knew by heart: The K-12 system can be punitive, especially for those with fewer resources. The system is based on mistrust of students.

The system is chaotic; furthermore, teachers should bear the burden, not the students, for when the chaos causes things to go awry. After all, the teachers aren't being graded on their ability to handle the chaos. For example, when the assignment turn-in system fails, or the attendance system fails, the teacher handles the failure instead of blaming students (or parents) for failing to figure out the complexities of the systems.

The problem, we decided, was that the kids are so terrified of messing up the technological logistics that they can't learn what they need to.

These two events caused me to think about my own teaching and student support this semester, given that we're deep into the semester and we will likely be teaching remotely again in the spring. It made me think about student support services and the burdens that they bear now, about accessibility services and how they must race to keep up with this new normal, and about faculty support services who must learn new technology and support faculty (read: hand-holding) who are unsure of their own ability to use it to teach.

So much chaos surrounds us. Are we losing our students in the shuffle?

At this moment, I want to reflect: What have I done well? And, perhaps more importantly, what should I have done better?

## **The Good: Direct Messaging. Do Better: Failing to Set Up Boundaries at the Beginning**

I'm using Microsoft Teams along with Class Notebook to manage my class this semester. We meet via Zoom, and Teams allows for our communication and assignments and

handouts. It also allows for communication and community. I divided the class into small groups in which they can work on their projects outside of class; Teams allows for chats in these groups and for sharing of documents.

Another feature that I allowed in our class team is DM to me from each student. In other words, I essentially allowed my students to text me (but without sharing my phone number). DMs allow for quick turnaround at a time when I'm frankly doing poorly at email and, at the same time, situations are rapidly changing and students (and I) are new at technology and online learning.

At first, I was glad to have to DMs to help us get the class off the ground. But then the DMs became overwhelming, especially when the questions were ones that were clearly stated in the syllabus or that were assigned in the reading. Students also messaged me at late hours and expected quicker turnarounds than they did with email. The fault was mine—I made two mistakes.

I failed to set clear boundaries about when they could contact me and how quickly I would reply. And I also failed to give them an alternative way to find information they needed.

The first thing I did was talk about boundaries in class. I reviewed the syllabus with them, which I didn't do because

I expected them to read it. But perhaps, right now, more hand-holding is okay.

The second thing I did was set up a whole-class chat group (similar to the small groups, but it contained all students in the class). I asked the students to first ask their questions in the group chat. If no one knew the answer, then

they could tag me in the question, and I would come into the chat and answer it for everyone to see. (Tagging means "hailing" me into the group. I receive a notification that I've been asked to come into the group.)

The large-group chat has worked wonders. "What time is this due again?" "Is anyone else having trouble finding [something]?" "Did she put up the class recording and I just can't locate it?" Most of the time, someone else can answer the question. Sometimes, though, the mistake is mine. Everyone is grateful that the question was asked, and I can come in and fix the confusion.

## **The Good: Mastering the Tech Long Before School Started. Do Better: Making the Tech Too Complicated for My Students**

Microsoft Teams and Class Notebook were entirely new to me before the semester started. I knew I didn't want to use Sakai because it is too unwieldy for online teaching (read: slow). But I spent an entire month learning the ins and outs of the software before the semester. I'm glad I did.

However, my students did not spend a month learning the software, and I didn't take that into consideration as much as I should have. Fortunately, as the semester has gone on, I have cut way back on the amount of the tech they need to use and made it far easier for them to use what they must. I have also /never/ penalized them for tech SNAFUs.

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*So much chaos surrounds us. Are we losing our students in the shuffle?*

In January 2021, Cobb-Greetham will begin the first-ever year-long sabbatical of her career. She will focus on personal scholarship and projects, including addressing the state of Oklahoma's understanding of its Native American identity.

### Center for Native American Scholars

OU has a long history with Native American students, who as far back as 100 years ago lobbied administration for classes and space on campus. It was the second university to offer a class in American Indian history. Native American Studies as it is organized now started in 1994. In 2018, OU opened the Native Nations Center with a focus on Indigenous research, leadership and tribal and community engagement.

Students today can major in Native American Studies and pursue graduate studies in the field. There are Native American scholars on campuses across the country, and Cobb-Greetham is among the scholars working to connect those people and have them engage in conversation and collaboration.

"Scholarship that is responsive to the needs of tribal nations as native nations have expressed them," says Cobb-Greetham, who is now a full professor. "The goal of the Native Nations Center is to try to provide the hub where people can find each other, where we can help be a liaison for tribal and community engagement so that it becomes easier for the 39 tribal nations of Oklahoma to express what their needs are and easier for scholars at OU to figure out how to address those things."

Cobb-Greetham says the Center enables scholars and tribes to leverage OU's exceptional institutional resources. These include language archives, art collections and tribal histories.

COVID-19 slowed some of the work on tribal outreach. Over the summer, she and others began to develop a comprehensive list of what OU has to offer Oklahoma's tribes. When ready, OU's tribal liaison, Cobb-Greetham and others will reach out to the tribes to start developing tribally responsive projects.

"The goal for the Native Nations Center is to become over time the front door—online and a physical space—that becomes the way to connect professors with students, to connect students to internships, practicum and tribal service learning opportunities, to connect tribal leaders and administrators with scholars," says Cobb-Greetham. "It's going to be a long process and a lot of work, but hard work is the best kind." 

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#### The Good: Cutting Back on Assignments. Do Better: Cut Back Even More

In my last column, I wrote about "rigor anxiety" and how to avoid it. I cut back on my assignments this semester for a class that I've taught before. I'm grateful I did. My teaching has actually improved because of it. I've been able to dive deeper into the material, giving my students a chance to revise their work, reconsider their errors and fix them and reflect more on their learning. These changes make for good

pedagogy whether I'm teaching online or in person.

The only thing I did wrong here was that I didn't cut back enough. I'm cutting back more assignments toward the end of the semester, pulling forward some of the work we did in the beginning to reflect on what we did weeks ago, having them take the stage rather than continuing to introduce more material up until their final exam. I'm not worried about my students having enough work to do, or learning enough, or anything of the sort.

I know they are doing the best they can. That's all I can ask for. 

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### Women on the Move, continued from page 9

- **Dr. Erika Williams** moves from associate dean for the College of Education at Fayetteville State University NC to associate dean of education, quality assurance and community engagement at Winston-Salem State University NC.
- **Dr. Mardell Wilson** moves from dean of the Edward and Margaret Doisy College of Health Sciences at Saint Louis University MO to provost at Creighton University NE.
- **Dr. Sharon Wise** becomes dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Utica College NY.
- **Dr. Kathy Wolfe** moves from dean of undergraduate programs at Nebraska Wesleyan University to dean of engaged education at Hamilton College NY.
- **Dr. Toyia Younger** moves from VP of leadership development and partnerships at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities to senior VP for student affairs at Iowa State University.
- **Sophie Zdatny, JD**, moves from interim to chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges System. 

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### PROFILE: Director Seeks to Heal the World, One Story at a Time, continued from page 8

than one, Native playwrights as part of its fifth annual Young Native Playwrighting contest. YIPAP recently sought submissions for its Monologue Writing Competition for Native Youth.

#### Navigating Systems

For Sayet, one personal benefit of the pandemic is that she gets to sleep in her own bed now. As an actor and director, she was constantly on a plane.

What is her favorite Shakespeare play? Although *The Tempest* contains an Indigenous character and she likes the play's poetic text, Sayet prefers *Twelfth Night* for its "beautiful structure" and portrayal of complex people.

Despite her youth—she was named to *Forbes'* 30 Under 30 in Hollywood & Entertainment in 2018—she continues to accrue accolades and awards, including the White House Champion of Change Award. Her youth belies a depth of wisdom found in others much older, something likely due to her Mohegan upbringing.

Wanting to be an actor because "I wanted to escape my own identity," Sayet went from questioning her place in the world to wondering "how do I actually change the world?" Being a director, she's able to reimagine what's possible on