



A Compassionate Approach to IL Instruction: What We Can Learn from the COVID-19 Pandemic

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abstract: In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed the lives of college students across the United States. These students, many of whom had never taken an online class prior to the pandemic, had to quickly adapt to the virtual learning environment and continue their studies during a time of great uncertainty. At the same time, many professors were teaching online for the first time, altering their instructional approaches to meet the needs of students. Both students and faculty faced immense stress caused by the public health crisis, economic distress, political turmoil, and racial injustice plaguing our nation during this time.

This article explores the pedagogy of teaching during a pandemic, with an emphasis on compassionate teaching. It identifies the educational barriers that college students faced with the rapid shift to online learning and considers how their experiences might provide insights for librarians. The recommendations for library practice include selecting a small number of essential learning outcomes for each instruction session, supplementing in-person or synchronous online sessions with asynchronous materials, and establishing a sense of community within the classroom. In addition to these suggestions, the author shares a narrative of her experiences incorporating compassionate pedagogy into online library instruction.

Introduction

In March 2020, colleges and universities in the United States and around the world announced plans to temporarily shift to remote learning in response to the spread of the coronavirus.¹ Campuses closed, students moved out of their dormitories, and faculty converted their planned course content to a virtual format. Some colleges and universities remained online-only into the following fall, while others attempted to regain some sense of normalcy by offering classes in a hybrid or fully in-person format.

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For higher education institutions that reopened, these in-person classes represented a “new normal” involving mask-wearing and social distancing. The pandemic raged on, but students continued their studies despite the obstacles.

As institutions of higher education adapted their courses and support services to comply with public health guidelines, community members grappled with uncertainty surrounding their own health and safety, the well-being of their loved ones, and the impact of the pandemic on their financial situation. The world collectively experienced a sense of “ambiguous loss” for months on end due to uncertainty about how long people would remain physically separated from family members, colleagues, and friends.²

The public health crisis was not the only traumatic event that shook the world in 2020. In May, the murder of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis police officer was captured on video and spurred hundreds of protests around the world to combat police brutality and systemic racism. Both students and faculty reported that the combination of the racial injustice crisis and the pandemic had a significant effect on their mental health.³

Each individual experienced and processed the situation differently. The economic uncertainty, racial injustice crisis, and political turmoil that occurred alongside the pandemic in the United States affected different people and different communities in different ways.⁴ Because the pandemic had a unique impact on each person, it is impossible to predict its full long-term effects on individuals and society at large.⁵

Higher education professionals sought to mitigate both short- and long-term impacts on learning by adapting their approaches to instruction and academic support services. Academic libraries played an essential role in this effort by helping students and faculty

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navigate this challenging transition. Little research has yet been published on how instruction librarians adapted their teaching during the pandemic to include more compassionate approaches. This paper will examine how the insights gained from the pandemic might positively inform future library instruction practice. It will begin with an exploration of the pedagogies of compassionate instruction and emergency remote teaching to provide a framework for understanding how instructors might support students in times of crisis. This article

will enumerate the unique challenges that students faced as they transitioned to online learning and consider how instruction librarians adapted their teaching approaches in response. Finally, the author will share how she used compassionate methods in her own teaching during the pandemic.

Literature Review

The early days of the pandemic were a time of crisis for students, faculty, and staff at institutions of higher education. This literature review will describe the pedagogical foundations for teaching in a crisis, with an emphasis on compassion.



Defining Compassion

Psychologists believe that compassion has two primary components: an emotional response to another individual's struggle and a desire to help.⁶ Compassion involves cognitive, affective, intentional, and motivational elements: a compassionate person has awareness of another individual's suffering, shows concern for it, has a genuine desire to relieve that suffering, and responds with an effort to alleviate that person's distress.⁷ In essence, compassion involves feeling empathy and then taking deliberate supportive measures to act upon that emotion.⁸

Compassion should not be conflated with empathy. Empathy lacks the intentional and motivational components that characterize compassion.⁹ Feelings of empathy do, however, inform compassionate approaches to teaching and librarianship. For example, we see evidence of empathy and compassionate response in growing areas of librarianship, such as user experience design and human-computer interaction.¹⁰ Compassion also differs from pity. Individuals who show compassion do not view others as weak or inferior to themselves; they simply recognize that others are suffering and strive to help them.¹¹

Effective communication is an integral component of compassion. Richie Hao summarizes compassionate communication in four underlying components: observation, feeling, need, and request. Compassionate communicators will view a situation without judgment, consider how they and others feel in response, determine what is needed to address those feelings, and act to help the affected individuals.¹²

Compassionate pedagogy is built upon relationships and trust.¹³ Such teaching is based on identifying how students may be struggling and then responding in ways that may alleviate some of their difficulties.¹⁴ Andrea Meluch and Maria Hannah further note that

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compassionate pedagogy "prioritizes kindness and social cohesion in one's teaching."¹⁵

Compassionate pedagogy incorporates peer support and may include using class time to offer a space for students to "'be' as well as 'do.'"¹⁶ Compassionate teaching strategies allow students to share experiences and provide support for one another. This encouragement can help students feel hopeful and safe during a traumatic time.¹⁷

Finally, compassionate teaching requires instructors to engage in self-reflective practices. Compassionate educators use self-reflection to consider how they can adapt their instructional approach to best meet the needs of their students.¹⁸

Compassionate Teaching

The pedagogy of compassion is particularly important in the university setting, given the prevalence of mental health issues on college campuses.¹⁹ College students often face barriers to getting mental health support, such as stigma, privacy concerns, and cost.²⁰ Kathryn Waddington argues that compassionate approaches to higher education are essential because the demand for mental health support far outpaces the availability of these services for college students.²¹ A campus that adopts a culture of compassion



may help students become more resilient in the face of challenges, which can improve retention rates.²²

Instructors in higher education settings have incorporated compassionate pedagogy in numerous ways. Acknowledging that students have different preferences and needs is fundamental to such teaching. Instructors can determine how to best serve their students by discussing learning styles at the start of the semester. As Hao suggests, beginning the course with a discussion of how students learn best helps to create an atmosphere of open communication and gives students a sense of the issues with which their instructor can help. These discussions could lead the teacher to offer instruction in multiple formats and provide several assignment options so that students can demonstrate their understanding of the material through their most effective communication style.²³ The class might also identify simple accommodations that could be offered without requiring a formal request process, such as allowing students to arrive to class a few minutes late without penalty if they must commute from a job or have a tight class schedule.²⁴

Meluch and Hannah suggest providing space for students to share their struggles so that the instructor can determine when a compassionate response is needed.²⁵ Instructors can give students this opportunity by facilitating icebreaker activities at the beginning of class, having conversations with individual students, distributing check-in surveys throughout the semester, and devoting class time for students to provide peer support for one another by sharing their feelings and offering tips to help manage the coursework. Compassionate instructors can also meet with students who encounter a significant challenge to help them identify accommodations that may help them continue with the course, rather than withdrawing or taking an incomplete.²⁶

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themselves. For example, Michael Stephens, an academic librarian, suggests that instruction librarians give some information about themselves aside from their professional responsibilities, such as describing their pets or hobbies, to help establish a connection with students. He notes that this disclosure has the ad-

ditional benefit of reminding students that they can and should have passions outside their career.²⁷

Compassionate educators should also be aware of how world events could affect their students. As Hooria Jazaieri argues, instructors should not ignore what happens in the outside world, but rather they should devote some time for students to acknowledge and process significant current events. Jazaieri further notes that instructors can promote compassion in their classrooms by drawing attention to any suffering or compassionate behaviors that they observe during a class. If students have trouble concentrating, the teacher can use the compassionate strategy of mindfulness, asking students to recognize where their attention is and helping them to redirect their focus.²⁸



Instructors can also show compassion through assessments and grading policies. Students can find assignment extensions to be motivating, even if they do not request them.²⁹ Some instructors accept all assignments any time prior to the end of the semester without imposing penalties for lateness.³⁰ In addition, teachers can offer “backup assignments” for students who face unanticipated obstacles, such as an asynchronous lesson in place of an in-class activity.³¹

Little scholarly literature discusses how academic libraries have incorporated compassionate pedagogy into their instruction. This gap in the literature extends beyond library instruction: J. J. Pionke and Rebecca Graham’s scoping review of empathetic and compassionate behaviors in service professions failed to find a single research study in the library and information science field. Most articles that fit their review criteria came from health and medicine.³²

Although current literature on information literacy (IL) instruction lacks an explicit connection to compassionate pedagogy, some previous research relates to the key tenets of this instructional approach. Kevin Klipfel and Dani Brecher Cook note the importance of empathetic, learner-centered strategies in library instruction because IL skills are complex and may seem daunting to novice researchers.³³ In addition, research on incorporating affective learning into IL instruction underscores the importance of compassionate approaches that consider how the learner might feel during their research process.³⁴ The widespread use of the term “library anxiety” to describe student’s apprehensions about using the library also demonstrates feelings of empathy that are essential to compassionate pedagogy.³⁵

Emergency Remote Teaching

The shift to an online format during a crisis has a pedagogy of its own: emergency remote teaching. In March 2020, college and university campuses closed and faculty began to move their course content online due to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty were thrust into “triage mode,” in which they had to quickly adapt to their new instructional context with little time and few resources to fully explore the pedagogy of online learning.³⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic is the largest-scale shift to remote learning to date, but it is not the first time that faculty have needed to adjust their courses in response to an immediate crisis. In the fall of 2005, colleges and universities on the Gulf Coast of the United States were forced to close their physical campuses during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. To prevent university students from interrupting their studies, educators from across the country, led by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, came together to create a temporary online educational program for displaced students, known as the Sloan Semester.³⁷ Other examples of crisis-induced instructional pivots include transitions to remote learning after earthquakes in New Zealand in 2010 and 2011³⁸ and campus closures in South Africa due to student protests in 2015 through 2017.³⁹

These shifts are known as “emergency remote teaching,” instruction that differs from the traditional course delivery that was planned. Emergency remote teaching requires a different skill set than that needed for a course intended to be online from the onset. The focus of such emergency instruction is to rapidly adjust planned content to provide a continuous educational experience, rather than creating a sustainable program that

fully incorporates the pedagogy of distance education.⁴⁰ Because emergency remote teaching involves sudden modification rather than extensive planning, some losses in perceived educational quality and student satisfaction may be attributed to limited preparation time, rather than shortcomings with the online modality itself. Failure to acknowledge the differences between emergency remote teaching and regular distance learning may perpetuate existing stigmas that online learning is lower quality than face-to-face instruction overall.⁴¹

It is important for instructors to set clear expectations for students at the onset of an emergency requiring remote teaching. Patricia Aguilera-Hermida asserts that such teaching requires professors to communicate clearly and frequently with students to

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help them understand the ensuing changes to their courses. These communications should be grounded in empathy. Successful remote learning requires students to have a strong degree of self-regulation, which faculty may encourage by asking them to reflect on their learning process. Because students' attitudes may influence their motivation, instructors should encourage learners to approach the new educational context with a positive outlook. They should not ignore the challenges that students may face during the crisis, but rather encourage them to express their

concerns and reflect on how they could overcome these obstacles. Aguilera-Hermida concludes that faculty can promote positive thinking by asking students to share what they have done well and what improvements they have made to upgrade their educational experience.⁴² In addition, teachers may demonstrate empathy during emergency remote situations by altering their planned course content. Faculty from higher education institutions around the country employed a "pedagogy of care" by considering the obstacles students might face and redesigning their courses in response to those new student needs.⁴³

It is reasonable to assume that all students experienced some level of trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether they expressed it or not. The next section will enumerate the educational challenges that college students faced during this time.

Educational Challenges during the Pandemic

College and university students encountered significant impediments to their academic progress because of the transition to remote learning. The challenges that students faced can provide insight into what they value, want, and require to be successful with their studies.

Study Spaces and Distractions

At the start of the pandemic, higher education students, faculty, and staff had to leave campus on short notice and begin learning and working from home, often in suboptimal

work spaces. Students reported that this transition to remote learning was anxiety-provoking and stressful.⁴⁴ Many needed to balance caregiving responsibilities with their academic and professional obligations as K–12 schools and childcare facilities closed. Some students had to take a new job in response to furloughs, layoffs, or other financial impacts from the pandemic. In addition, some out-of-state students struggled to keep up with synchronous class schedules when they lived in a different time zone than most of their peers.⁴⁵ Students also missed hands-on, experiential learning opportunities that were impossible to achieve in the remote learning environment.⁴⁶ In one study, students cited writing laboratory reports as among the most challenging assignments to complete online, perhaps in part due to the loss of the face-to-face component of these exercises.⁴⁷

College and university students also needed to adjust to living and learning in the same location. Students who previously viewed their home as a place to rest and relax struggled to turn their residence into a productive space.⁴⁸ With college campuses and public spaces closed, some students no longer had a quiet place to study.⁴⁹ Lacking an adequate space to do their coursework was a significant problem for many students prior to the pandemic, but the forced shift to remote learning increased the number of learners experiencing this obstacle. The number of community college students who reported difficulty finding a quiet space to study nearly doubled between the fall 2018 and spring 2020 semesters.⁵⁰

Students also experienced new distractions that reduced their concentration. In a study of undergraduate chemistry students at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, 84 percent said that distractions in their environment had a negative impact on their academic performance. The increased reliance on technology contributed to this problem: 73 percent of students in the same study reported that technological devices were a significant distraction from their academic work.⁵¹

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Motivation and Engagement

Both students and faculty perceived a decline in overall engagement with coursework following the transition to online learning.⁵³ Distractions, mental health impacts, and other pandemic-related hardships hindered students' motivation for keeping up with their studies.⁵⁴ A survey of students at a private college in the northeastern United States found that engagement issues, as well as frustration and boredom, caused considerable mental distress.⁵⁵ Eighty-one percent of physics students in a study at the University of Colorado Boulder stated that their motivation to complete their academic work declined after shifting to the remote environment.⁵⁶

Not all students experienced the same decrease in motivation. In a study at a public university in New Jersey, 50 percent of female students reported a drop in commitment



during the period of emergency remote teaching, compared to only 6.67 percent of male students. A common theme among that study's participants was the assertion that their "mindset at home is different than at school."⁵⁷

Communication Issues and Loss of Connectedness

Students were detrimentally affected by reduced contact with their instructors and their classmates. Studies of college students in the United States found that they felt

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less connected to their peers, their instructors, or both after the shift to online learning.⁵⁸ Lockdowns and social distancing guidelines likely exacerbated these issues, as students had fewer opportunities for personal interaction in other areas of their lives.⁵⁹ More than 40 percent of respondents in a nationwide survey reported that they did not feel connected to other students at

their institution during the latter half of the spring 2020 semester. Interestingly, students in that same study reported a greater sense of connection with their professors than with one another.⁶⁰

The loss of in-person communication between students affected their ability to complete certain assignments. In one survey, college students in the United States reported that group projects were the most challenging type of assignment to complete during the remote learning period.⁶¹ Technology issues also made group work challenging, as troubleshooting video or audio issues could take up valuable time during a group meeting or breakout session.⁶² The decreased contact with students and professors also had implications outside the classroom. Some students feared missing out on networking or mentorship opportunities that would normally arise from informal conversations on campus.⁶³

Students had to ask questions in a different way in their online classes than they had during face-to-face sessions. Chemistry students at Ferris State University in Big

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Rapids, Michigan, noted that they missed asking questions and hearing other students' questions during a lecture.⁶⁴ Students sometimes felt uncomfortable asking questions in synchronous classes. They could no longer pull their professor aside to ask a question privately, and they needed to deliberately unmute themselves to ask something in front of the entire class.⁶⁵ Not all students felt

uneasy asking questions in this environment, however. In a study at the University of British Columbia, 41 percent of students reported feeling more comfortable asking ques-

tions online, compared to 31 percent who preferred making inquiries in person, and 28 percent who gave a neutral response. The authors posited that students who felt more comfortable asking questions online may have appreciated the partial anonymity that the virtual chat feature provides.⁶⁶

In addition, students did not always communicate with professors about their struggles outside the classroom. While faculty anticipated that students would face considerable challenges, such as inadequate work spaces and financial hardships, they lacked a full picture of the stressors affecting students who did not share their personal problems.⁶⁷

Technology Issues

Technology issues also impeded academic progress. Students who had Internet access at home sometimes experienced unreliable connections. Forty-four percent of students in a nationwide study stated that connectivity problems limited their ability to engage in their classes on occasion, while 16 percent reported facing these issues often.⁶⁸ Technology challenges were not evenly distributed among the student population but instead reflected existing equity issues.

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For example, low-income students were more likely to report problems with technology.⁶⁹

Implications for Library Practice

Insights from educational experiences during the pandemic have highlighted conditions that are necessary for students to learn at their best. This section will provide suggestions for what librarians can learn from the period of emergency remote teaching and how they can better support students through compassionate approaches.

Information Literacy Session Content

The pandemic led faculty to adjust their course content in response to students' new circumstances. Instruction librarians might also use this opportunity to reflect on what material they choose to cover in a typical session and how.

First, librarians should be strategic in their lesson planning and focus on the main content that they want students to know. When librarians meet with a class for only a short time, it can be tempting to try to cover many topics quickly, but students struggle to keep up with this approach. Instead, librarians should focus on the key details that students need to know to complete their research projects and help connect them with outside resources for further, self-directed learning if desired. Amy James suggests that librarians use a methodical approach to crafting learning outcomes for IL sessions and should include from one to three objectives in a single class. Any greater number may be too difficult to achieve within a one-shot session.⁷⁰ Klipfel and Cook further state



that students will retain IL content better if instructors teach a small number of topics in depth rather than covering many topics in less detail.⁷¹

Librarians should be particularly cautious about the quantity of information they provide in an asynchronous lesson. They should carefully consider the time they expect students will take to complete a module because it is easy to overwhelm students in this format.⁷² While a synchronous session has a discrete beginning and end, an asynchronous lesson lacks time limits. Not all students will require the same time to complete a given module, so librarians should consider the expected duration of their activities in comparison to the maximum time they would like a student to spend.

Librarians may also apply a compassionate approach by relinquishing some control over the content of an IL session. Instead of coming in with a plan and sticking to it, librarians could give students autonomy over what content will be covered. For example,

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a librarian may give the class a list of predetermined topics and ask the students to put them in rank order, prioritized by the students' need to comprehend specific topics or resources. Then, the instruction librarian will have a clearer picture of what information to prioritize during the limited

time with the class. Librarians can use a similar approach when planning asynchronous modules. They may distribute a survey to students and ask which topics would enhance their understanding and most benefit their knowledge of the research process.

Instruction librarians can also apply compassionate pedagogy to their practice by allowing opportunities for students to reflect. Librarians may engage in "empathetic listening" as students share challenges relating to their research process.⁷³ A period of reflection may allow students to learn from one another and recognize that their peers have experienced similar hurdles.

Information Literacy Session Format

Librarians should also consider how they can offer multiple instruction formats to meet

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student needs. Studies of instruction in higher education during the emergency remote period found that students appreciated the flexibility that asynchronous course components afforded them, as they could work through materials at their own pace at a convenient time.⁷⁴ Other benefits of asynchronous instruction include providing an opportunity to

pause and reflect on learning before continuing to the next topic and the ability to easily review course content throughout the semester.⁷⁵

Librarians should consider how asynchronous instruction can fit in with their previous instruction models. They may not always have complete control over the modality of their instruction sessions, as faculty who request library instruction will often specify



a desired format (face-to-face, synchronous online, or asynchronous online). Even if a faculty member requests a face-to-face or in-person session, librarians may respond with an offer to take a blended learning approach. In this scenario, a librarian could teach a live class and supplement the live session with asynchronous content, such as videos, tutorials, or independent activities.

Offering both synchronous and asynchronous information literacy instruction will help students in several ways. First, asynchronous materials will provide a good reference for students as they work on their projects. There is sometimes a lag between when an IL session occurs and when students begin a research project in earnest. Asynchronous materials will allow learners to revisit the content of the session at the point of need. In addition, asynchronous materials are useful for students who miss an in-person class and would otherwise lose out on the content of the lesson.⁷⁶

Creating high-quality asynchronous materials may require a considerable time commitment from librarians, but doing so may be a worthwhile investment in the long run. Asynchronous learning objects can be repurposed or reused from semester to semester. In addition, if librarians take a modular approach to asynchronous instruction by splitting up a lesson into multiple discrete components, they may reuse individual components across courses, rather than starting from scratch for each new instruction request.

Providing supplementary asynchronous materials will also give librarians increased flexibility for how they conduct their face-to-face or synchronous online sessions. They

may leverage new asynchronous instruction skills gained during the pandemic to expand their reach beyond a one-shot session. If librarians create asynchronous tutorials for common task-based instructional elements, they may ask students to access these materials outside class to free up synchronous class time for more theoretical content, discussions, and activities to promote critical thinking skills. The studies demonstrating that students felt less motivated and less connected to their peers in the online learning environment underscore the desire of students to engage in active learning exercises and interact with their classmates.⁷⁷

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Emphasizing a Supportive Role

Throughout the period of emergency remote teaching, campus support resources were crucial to student success. Students appreciated having highly communicative faculty during the pandemic,⁷⁸ and librarians can learn from this approach. Given the large number of students that librarians may encounter in IL sessions over a semester, they may not find it feasible to provide individualized follow-up messages to every student they teach. However, librarians can encourage disciplinary faculty to provide referrals for

students who need assistance navigating the research process. Previous studies suggest that students who have received a recommendation from a faculty member will more likely reach out to the library for help than students who have not,⁷⁹ so this strategy may help connect students with the support that they need.

Librarians can also support students by making themselves available outside class time. Disciplinary faculty adopted virtual office hours during the pandemic, and some

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librarians also experimented with this practice even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak.⁸⁰

Virtual librarian office hours may prove useful to commuter students or distance learners who do not come to campus frequently. In addition, students noted it was particularly beneficial to have faculty available to meet with them outside standard working hours.⁸¹

Research and instruction librarians should

also consider increasing their flexibility for student appointments to better accommodate different availabilities.

The library may also help to connect students to other support services on campus, such as the writing center. Students noted difficulty knowing how to access academic support services during the pandemic,⁸² which demonstrates how they value these

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resources. Librarians can passively connect students to other campus supports by embedding links to resources on library course and research guides, learning management system pages, or slides from instruction sessions. They might also offer direct referrals to services during individual

consultations. Above all, librarians should emphasize that it is their job to support student success.

One Librarian's Experiences

This section describes my own experiences incorporating compassionate teaching practices into online IL sessions during the pandemic. I will also reflect upon how I plan to adapt these strategies for future classes once the current crisis has abated.

Spring 2020: The Rise of Asynchronous Library Instruction

I am a research and instruction librarian at the Albert S. Cook Library at Towson University in Towson, Maryland, and the liaison to most campus STEM programs. Towson is a large, public, doctoral-granting university in the Baltimore area. In March 2020, university leadership announced that all classes would temporarily move online for the two weeks following spring break. As with most universities across the United States, those two weeks evolved into a fully remote spring semester and summer session.

Following spring break, several of my IL sessions needed to be converted to online format, including 12 sections of a chemistry lab course. I determined that I should provide asynchronous instruction for those chemistry students. Teaching 12 consecutive online



sessions via Web conferencing software with which I had no prior experience seemed like more than I could handle during an already stressful time. Ultimately, I provided all my remaining spring instruction sessions in asynchronous format for two reasons: I already had some familiarity with video recording, and some students' new schedules and learning environments might preclude them from attending a synchronous session. While most science faculty members adopted the practice of recording synchronous sessions for students who could not attend, I felt that I could offer a better learning experience by creating self-paced, carefully planned asynchronous lessons with discrete components for different topics, in comparison to recording a single unedited class.

Prior to the pandemic, I identified a need for asynchronous instruction materials in several of my liaison areas. In some cases, faculty asked me for these materials directly because their course was fully online or because they could not spare class time for a library session. I had also begun to receive more instruction requests than I could fit into my calendar. This scheduling struggle led me to contemplate teaching asynchronously. I was methodical in my approach to asynchronous instruction and considered how certain components of my instruction could be made reusable across courses, semesters, and in some cases, disciplines.

I gave the greatest consideration to the previously mentioned chemistry course because that lesson would be distributed to more than 200 students. In prior semesters, I taught a 90-minute crash course on scientific research for each of 12 sessions to help students complete a literature review assignment. As I planned to convert this lesson to an online format, I questioned students' desire or ability to watch a 90-minute video lecture. In addition, a long lecture would provide minimal opportunity for the active learning exercises that I liked to include in my sessions. Instead, I split the lesson into four sections corresponding to the main topics I would cover, plus an additional introductory section to let students know who I am and provide context for their assignment. I emphasized that I did not expect students to complete the entire lesson in one sitting, and that I preferred they did not try unless they had an incredible attention span.

Within each section, I provided several activities, or "steps," for students to complete. These steps consisted of short videos, ranging from 2 to 20 minutes in length, and brief activities, such as evaluating the credibility of a specific website or determining whether a background or a scholarly source would be more appropriate to answer a given question. Because I knew students had limited time to devote to each of their courses, I labeled certain steps as "optional." The "optional" label indicated components that were not essential to students' understanding and could be skipped if they were short on time or had some prior experience with a skill or concept. I ended each section with instructions for independent search practice and an invitation to e-mail me with questions.

I also tried to personalize my instruction because it would be difficult to connect with students asynchronously. I included a brief, optional introduction video in each asynchronous lesson in spring 2020. This video not only let students know who I am and how I can help them but also showed them a friendly face behind the videos, guides, and activities. I also emphasized my commitment to digital accessibility and encouraged students to reach out to me if they encountered any barriers. I hoped that this personal video would make students feel more comfortable asking me for assistance.



It was difficult to assess how students responded to the compassionate teaching measures I employed, since we could not connect in real time. It was sometimes disheartening to look at video view counts and other metrics and see that some students did not interact with my materials at all. This experience served as a reminder, however, that students may have more pressing issues in their lives than learning how to search scholarly databases. If they do not seem engaged in a session, it is not always a reflection of our effectiveness as instructors.

I kept this thought in my head throughout my interactions with students. When a student e-mailed me with a question that was answered in one of my videos, I remembered that there could be a multitude of reasons why a student had not watched a video

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or retained the information in it. The reason was unlikely to have been apathy, because truly apathetic students would not e-mail their librarian. It was more likely that a student could not complete the lesson because of problems with technology access, time shortages due to outside responsibilities, or difficulty focusing on online instruction as a crisis unfolded in the world around them.

Keeping these possibilities in mind, I was patient with students. I answered their questions and suggested that they take a closer look at my materials if they had time and had not done so already. In turn, I hoped that students would extend the same grace toward me when my response times were slower than normal due to stressors in my personal life or if I misinterpreted their question.

Summer 2020: Bridging the Gap

Summer 2020 was a time of great ambiguity. The university announced plans for a hybrid fall semester. Faculty, including librarians, could choose whether to work a fully remote or partially remote schedule. Our library decided to offer all instruction in online format. While these decisions were made early, numerous questions remained. For example, would librarians be livestreamed into classrooms, with some students watching on a projector and others viewing from home? Would faculty call upon librarians to offer more instruction sessions than usual to use up class time on “online days” for hybrid courses? Would they prefer asynchronous or synchronous library instruction for their courses?

I taught for two courses during summer 2020 while still puzzling over what the fall semester might look like. One, a computer science course, was asynchronous at the professor’s request. For that class, I followed my now typical format of splitting content into short sections that students could view at the point of need. The other course, a summer biology program known as Bridges for local community college students, gave me greater flexibility. The class normally met synchronously online. I still had no experience teaching on a Web conferencing platform and feared that a two-hour synchronous session using unfamiliar software might not work well. However, I sorely missed interacting with students and did not want to miss out on that opportunity. Therefore, I experi-



mented with a flipped classroom approach. I recorded several videos and planned a few activities that students could complete independently during their normal class time. Then, I joined them for a question-and-answer session during the last half hour of class.

This approach brings up an important point of compassionate pedagogy: we need to understand our own strengths to be effective instructors. There is value in stepping out of one's comfort zone, and I encourage my fellow instruction librarians to take risks in their classrooms now and then. But, even in those situations, we need to ground our instruction in what we do well. After creating dozens of asynchronous instruction videos in a short time frame, I knew that I could convey the information I wanted students to know using that modality. I was less confident in my ability to navigate a Blackboard Collaborate classroom on a single monitor while working from my kitchen, so I opted to use that modality for the least technologically complex component of the class: the question and answer period.

We need to understand our own strengths to be effective instructors.

When I joined the students in their virtual classroom, I let them know how delighted I was to meet them in real time. I also acknowledged the hardships that I knew they were under. When I teach science students, I start my sessions by discussing my previous background as a biochemist to let them know that I speak their language and can relate to the challenges they face. In this class, I also admitted that I could only imagine what it must be like to take biology courses fully online and try to learn complex lab techniques without hands-on practice. In acknowledging the students' struggle, I encouraged them to give themselves a pat on the back for continuing with their studies despite the obstacles. I told them that I recognized that learning to use library resources might not be their top priority during a global pandemic, so I understood that they might not retain everything from our class. Instead, I said that they could contact me with any questions they had, and they could count on me to respond without fear of judgment. I provided this acknowledgment in every class I taught going forward.

I was glad to connect with students again, and it helped prepare me for the coming semester. Not only was I reminded of how energizing teaching can be but also I had crossed the first hurdle of synchronous online instruction: completing that first session. As the summer went on, student feedback at Towson reflected a strong desire for synchronous classes in the fall, so I wanted to prioritize that modality going forward.

Fall 2020 and Beyond: Building Connections

Fall 2020 was supposed to be a hybrid semester for Towson, with a mix of in-person and online courses. Just before classes began, however, a spike in positive COVID tests on campus prompted the administration to move all classes online temporarily. Several days thereafter, the university leadership concluded that community spread had become too prevalent to continue with an in-person semester. Students who had just begun their college experience or who had returned to campus for the first time in six months had to quickly pack their things and adjust to another semester of learning from home.

I was set to teach my first course of the semester one day after this announcement was made. As I planned my first course of the semester while processing the emotions



spurred by this announcement, I considered not only what students needed but also what I needed. A typical library instruction session did not feel appropriate. Instead, the students and I might benefit from a more relaxed atmosphere than usual. I decided to eschew the PowerPoint slides I had started to prepare and instead focus on building a connection with the class. I started by checking in with the students to see how they were feeling. I acknowledged that their minds might wander during some of our time together. I readily admitted that I was not at my best, either. Instead of my usual instruction session, I gave a short demonstration of a few resources, with a focus on what they really needed to know to complete their assignments. I used the rest of our time to answer any questions they had about research.

I still wanted students to learn the content they needed to complete their research, so I adopted what has become my go-to instruction model: the reverse flipped classroom. I teach students what I can during a synchronous session, with an emphasis on class discussions and active learning exercises. Then, after the session, I provide optional asynchronous materials to supplement the class. Some materials simply rehash what I went over during class as a refresher for students who may have forgotten some details. Other materials fill in gaps for what I could not cover due to time constraints.

As the weeks went on and I settled into a groove with my online instruction, I took this approach one step farther. After one session, I asked a biology class which topics they wanted to learn more about. I distributed a Microsoft Forms survey, asking the students to rank a few preselected topic ideas and suggest any other subjects they would like their librarian to help with. The knowledge I gained from this survey allowed me to prioritize which asynchronous materials to create to supplement our session, rather than guessing what students would find useful.

In discussions with colleagues, I learned that some librarians have begun their instruction sessions by asking students to rank which topics they want to prioritize. I have yet to feel comfortable giving up that much control over my lesson planning, but I

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appreciate the compassion behind this approach. Even after the pandemic has subsided, we should not forget that students come to us with a range of experiences, and they all have challenges outside the classroom that may disrupt their focus. They may lack the time or attention to complete every reading, video, or other exercise that is assigned. In addition, instruction librarians are usually brief visitors to a course, operating with little knowledge of the students' background. By asking them what they need to know, the librarian can use the limited time with a class more effectively. While I have yet to explicitly ask students

what they want me to cover, I have tried a lower-stakes version of this strategy. I begin classes with a short poll to gauge students' previous research experience. If my class will involve instruction on how to conduct a literature search, I ask students to share which databases they have used in the past. I use the results of that survey to decide



which databases to demonstrate for the class, and I note any similarities or differences to databases with which students have greater familiarity.

I also took a compassionate approach to communication. While faculty members had different policies regarding use of video and chat, I wanted my sessions to be low-stress. I let students know that I loved to see their faces and hear their voices, but I understood that there were many reasons why they might want to join without their video. I preferred not to teach to a Zoom room full of blank boxes, but providing a comfortable learning environment for students outweighed my personal preference. Whenever I asked the class a question or started to hold a discussion, I reiterated that students should respond in the manner that felt

most comfortable. In a few classes, many students would unmute themselves and speak. The more common scenario, however, was that one or two students would speak up while a livelier conversation ensued in the chat. I thanked the students for responding in whatever form they chose.

I knew that students missed the sense of connection they would normally feel if they were together on campus, and so I emphasized establishing community during our classes. Although I could not fully re-create the serendipitous conversations students would have with one another while crossing paths in the hallway or waiting for a class to begin, I tried to allow for some informal chatter. During the awkward silence that often occurs while waiting for attendees to join a Zoom room, I tried to strike up a friendly conversation with the faculty member in hopes that a student or two might join in. I also thought that sharing a silly personal anecdote, such as expressing gratitude that my neighbor had stopped practicing the recorder when it was time for me to teach, might humanize myself to the students who arrived early.

In addition, I encouraged students to interact with one another. In one activity, I created a collaborative work space for research topic development on Padlet, a virtual "bulletin board" where users can share their thoughts. I instructed each student to add a note with their preliminary topic ideas. Then, I had them respond to their peers' suggestions with praise, constructive criticism, or ideas about how they might begin their research. I responded to these topics with encouragement, and their instructor did the same. This experience did not feel the same as walking around the classroom and listening to students chat with each other about their research. Nevertheless, students engaged with the activity and offered good feedback.

I also tried to inject my personality throughout each session to further establish a sense of connection. For example, when I fumbled around with the windows on my single monitor while sharing my screen, I joked that at least my technical troubles gave them a chance to enjoy my Legend of Zelda desktop background. I also tried to make my PowerPoint slides fun and visually appealing to combat the Zoom fatigue that comes from attending a full day of video lectures. I replaced my usual headshot with a

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Bitmoji depicting myself as a cartoon character, and this Bitmoji reappeared a few times throughout the session. My cartoon self might pop up with a quizzical expression on a slide that prompted a class discussion, or it might appear with a ribbon tied around its finger as a reminder on a slide of tips for database searching. I also added relevant Web comics to insert a little humor into a content-heavy session. While each student's pandemic experience was different, we all had gone through a lot and could use some silliness as a distraction.

Finally, I embodied a crucial component of compassionate pedagogy through my sessions: lending support to students who struggled. At the beginning and end of every session, and whenever I wrapped up instruction on a specific skill, I reminded students that I am available to help. I gave specific examples of the types of questions they could ask so that they need not worry that they were imposing or asking the wrong person when they contacted me. I also reassured them that librarians are resourceful: if they reached out with a question that I was not well equipped to answer, I could connect them with the right person to assist.

I provided many different communication methods to accommodate students' preferences. I offered virtual appointments (video optional!) for students who wanted to talk things out in real time. I set up a Google Voice account for students who preferred to speak on the phone. I gave students the link to my personal virtual chat queue so they could instant message me anytime I was online. Finally, I reiterated that my e-mail in-box was always open. I concluded each session with a reminder that it was a stressful time, but our university was there to support them—not just those who work in the library but also their professors and the numerous campus support services that had adapted their services to an online format. Research can be stressful, so I encouraged students to alleviate some of that anxiety by helping each other and reaching out to me for assistance with any challenge, no matter how large or small.

Self-Support: Showing Compassion toward Myself

The pandemic also helped me recognize the importance of supporting my own well-being to be an effective instructor. Like my students, I suffered challenges during the pandemic that disrupted my focus and put me in a negative headspace. To show compassion toward my students, I needed to show compassion for myself first. Since I am a “planner” and need to feel thoroughly prepared to do my best, I ensured that my physical and technological needs were met before each session. For example, I always made sure my room was a comfortable temperature, that I had water or a warm beverage handy, that the websites and software programs I intended to use functioned properly, and that I had silenced all my notifications. These simple steps became a ritual for me with my online teaching and left me feeling prepared and ready to teach.

I also considered how to support myself outside the Zoom room. My most significant self-support measure came in October 2020: after struggling to cope with the social isolation of the pandemic, I traveled from Maryland to Minnesota to work remotely from my parents' house, where I would have the in-person support that I craved. I also considered how to maintain a good work/life balance when the lines between work and home blurred. For me, that meant deleting Outlook from my phone and sticking to



a regular schedule as much as possible. When I signed off for the night or the weekend, I made a concerted effort to stop checking my work e-mail and other communication channels until the next day to help me disconnect. By setting a divide between work and rest, I could focus on work during my regular hours and give students my undivided attention during classes and research consultations. I also leaned on my colleagues for personal and professional support. On the personal side, I enjoyed my library's virtual knitting group on Friday afternoons, which became one of the few constants I could count on during this uncertain time. On the professional side, I appreciated my department's weekly informal drop-in sessions, where we chatted about technology and helped each other improve our online instruction. We adopted the mantra "We're all doing the best we can, and our best is good enough!" to get us through the most difficult times.

These supports helped me to cope with the challenges of pandemic teaching. Self-compassion will look different for each person based on individual needs and preferences, but all instructors should consider what supports they need to perform their best when working with students.

Post-Pandemic Library Instruction

Some instructors may look back upon the period of online instruction and think, "Never again, if I can avoid it." We may wish to put the struggles of pandemic teaching behind us, but we should not miss the opportunity to reflect on how this experience might benefit our instructional practice. Our future instruction sessions may lack the backdrop of a global crisis, but students will still benefit from compassionate teaching strategies.

The most important change that I plan to carry forward is the reverse flipped classroom approach. I expect students to have improved focus and information retention when we enter a period of post-pandemic normalcy, but they will still have distractions outside the classroom. Prior to the pandemic, I often acknowledged that I did not expect students to remember every detail of what we discussed in class, so they should always feel comfortable reaching out for clarification. Now that I have developed a greater capacity for creating online instruction materials and have amassed a sizable library of learning objects that can be reused, I can provide greater post-session support than ever before. If students have materials to supplement the in-person session, they can refresh their memory at the point of need.

Students who missed my session can also catch up at their own pace by working through my materials. Prior to the pandemic, I occasionally received requests for make-ups from students who missed my sessions due to illness or outside responsibilities. They sometimes expected me to meet with them one-on-one to reteach the content I

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had covered in class. On some occasions, I accommodated those requests and offered a shortened version of my lesson based on that students' prior knowledge and abilities. In other cases, however, the student and I could not find a mutually convenient time prior to their assignment deadline. With my new asynchronous approach, these students can access the content they need even if there is no opening in my busy schedule. I still make myself available for student appointments as much as I can, but the asynchronous versions of class content offer greater flexibility for me as well as the students.

I hope that having a library of asynchronous research instruction materials at my disposal will allow me to use my time with students more effectively. Keeping my instruction fresh while teaching similar content across multiple courses that may have

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overlapping class rosters is a perennial challenge. It is always a struggle to strike the right balance between providing enough detail for students who are new to scientific research without boring students who may have attended a similar session twice already that week. In the coming semesters, I will consider how to leverage my asynchronous materials to free in-person class time for more course-specific concerns, class discussions of complex issues in research, and active learning exercises. For example,

I could provide a video introduction to search strategies and a few short database demonstrations. Students could choose to watch this content prior to the in-person class if they had never attended a session with me or if they wanted a refresher on basic research skills. Then, in the class meeting, we could dive into their assignment and consider which databases, search terms, and other strategies would be the most effective.

I will never forget the experience of teaching full classes of students who all faced extreme challenges, both personally and academically, while I coped with trauma of my own. During the pandemic, I could assume that each student felt the impacts of a public health crisis of unprecedented proportions, so I could respond to that suffering by acknowledging the situation and establishing myself as a supportive presence. In the future, I need not begin every course with an acknowledgment that we are all going through a difficult time and should adjust our expectations accordingly. I will always remember the empathy I felt for students, however, and will use that feeling to inform my future interactions with them. As a brief visitor to the students' courses, I may lack an awareness of their unique challenges, but I can still use compassionate approaches to benefit those whose suffering is not apparent. The pandemic taught me the importance of human connections in the academic environment, so I will work to establish a sense of community in my classrooms and hope that students take me up on my offer to support them outside class.



Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a time of unprecedented struggle for communities around the world. College and university students had to discover how to learn effectively online, and faculty members had to master teaching online in a matter of weeks. These challenges highlighted the importance of incorporating compassionate pedagogy to meet the needs of students in crisis. Librarians can adopt principles of compassionate teaching to create an atmosphere of comfort and safety for their students. They should think critically about what content they most need to cover and what they may leave out, and they should consider providing asynchronous content that allows for flexible learning throughout a semester.

Now that librarians have been immersed in online teaching, they should evaluate how their new capacity for online teaching may complement their previous instruction model. With everything we have discovered about student learning preferences and needs during the pandemic, we would be remiss to move out of this crisis without pausing to reflect on how we might best serve our students. Instruction librarians should remember that students may have struggles that are not apparent in the classroom. Showing patience, understanding, and respect without making judgments can go a long way toward helping students feel comfortable, supported, and ready to learn.

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