

Emerging from COVID-19: A moment for education to embrace classroom disruption

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By Audrey Fisch, Opinion Contributor



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As vaccines become more available, the end of the pandemic may finally be in sight. In the months ahead, education, like many industries, might return to normal.

But as the transition occurs, we need to take a pause and ask ourselves: What should that normal look like, and is this the moment to fight for one standard of education?

There has been a lot of discussion about how remote education has failed students during this pandemic. It would be a shame, however, if in our haste to put the educational problems of remote instruction behind us, we simply pivoted back to our old normal and missed the opportunity to think critically about what elements of pandemic learning are worth embracing.

In the business world, there is no question that the new normal will be different. Industries are considering whether and how remote work, either full or part-time, can be adopted permanently. This discussion is not only the result of recognition that some employees enjoy the flexibility of the work-from-home option. Companies have also realized that they can save money on commercial real estate and business travel while reducing productivity losses suffered by worker commuting difficulties.

Now is an opportunity for educators to embark on an analysis of how, post-COVID, we can and should change. Let's embrace this moment of disruption to lift our sights beyond the question of how to get students and teachers back into the classroom to assess the opportunities that this year of disruption has presented us.

One of the misconceptions COVID-19 has exposed is our worship of attendance in education. From K-12 to higher education, most institutions prize attendance. Many elementary schools award good attendance prizes. College syllabi often apportion a percentage of the final grade to attendance and participation. Pre-COVID, I included a note encouraging attendance on my syllabus: "Last year 86% of the students in my classes who missed two or fewer classes received an A." My mantra was show up, listen, collaborate, and learn, and you will succeed.

It seemed simple and obvious.

But it isn't. Do we really want students to strive to attend class no matter what, even if they are ill? As we've realized over the past year, the answer is no. Even more, is it always appropriate or even possible to prioritize attendance? Should a student have to choose between a religious celebration, a funeral, or wisdom teeth removal on the one hand and class on the other?

Can you listen, collaborate, learn, and succeed without being in the room?

Particularly for first-generation, low-income students, the pressure of attending events outside the classroom can be intense. One of my students needed to miss class for her family's citizenship swearing-in ceremony. Many need to miss class in order to facilitate and/or translate at doctors' appointments for relatives. Some need to miss class to stay home with a sick sibling, particularly if their parents don't enjoy the benefits of paid sick days.

Education, for my students, is a huge priority; school attendance, however, is simply not that simple. And I am not even raising the tremendous challenges of balancing work and school, especially when many employers make demands that interfere with school attendance.

Consider, though, what the pandemic has taught us about how flexible we can be in facilitating learning. Suddenly, we discovered how to include students in learning even if they aren't physically in the classroom. I had one student attend class last fall while commuting to his job (he wasn't driving!). Last week, a student gave a presentation while caring for her toddler. Many college students found themselves tuning into their college classes while keeping one eye on their younger siblings' remote learning. And when that toddler was being less than compliant or the younger sibling spilled milk on his tablet, there was also the video of class that could be reviewed later.

Has it been ideal? Undoubtedly not. Distance learning is nothing new. Hybrid and hyflex technologies and pedagogies have been around for a while, and they are hard. Suddenly, however, a far greater number of teachers and students have had the opportunity to experiment with them. Like those Zoom business meetings, we have come to appreciate their benefits and we should

not forget those benefits in our rush back into the classroom, especially when considering the flexibility that remote learning has provided for students from low-income families.

Over the course of the pandemic, elite institutions spent gazillions on tents, testing, and technology, and a lucky minority of students were able to learn under relatively normal conditions, socially distanced, with masks, and in person at richly-resourced institutions. Many of those students will want and be able to return to a version of their old normal. But these students and institutions should not dominate the conversation: They do not represent the vast majority of students, most of whom don't have the luxury of studying at elite schools.

As we begin to think about the widespread return to in-person education, I hope we reject the knee-jerk return to the old normal and do more to employ our new-found skills and flexibility to respect and accommodate our students' needs. Instead of a line highlighting an unattainable ideal for attendance, my pandemic syllabus has the following: "Take care of yourself and your family first. Everything about this class is flexible. Whatever happens, we will work it out."

Looking back, I should always have had that on my syllabus.

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