A Post-COVID Review of Classroom Practices

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“People resist new ideas until external shocks force them to change.”

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly presented a shock to higher education. It shocked students, who in the spring of 2020 were suddenly sent home to take class remotely. For many students, that was not an easy transition, due to fears of illness or death, isolation, financial concerns, difficult working-from-home situations, among other challenges. And of course the pandemic impacted professors as well.

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1 Jon Marcus, Will the Coronavirus Forever Alter the College Experience?, N.Y. Times (June 25, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/education/learning/coronavirus-online-education-college.html (quoting Professor Vijay Govindarajan of Dartmouth Tuck School of Business).

2 Commentators suggest that the impact of the 2020–2021 pandemic on members of Generation Z—born between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s—is akin to the impact on earlier generations of such momentous events as World War II, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and September 11. See, e.g., Amanda Shafer, How Will the Coronavirus Pandemic Shape Gen Z? University Students Share their Thoughts, USA TODAY (Apr. 10, 2020), https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/04/10/coronavirus-pandemic-may-forever-shape-how-gen-z-views-world-column/2960084001/ (“For my generation, Gen Z, the COVID-19 pandemic will leave a scar on us. The question is how will it shape our view of the world?”); see also Anne Dennon, Coronavirus Impacts on Students and Online Learning, BEST COLLEGES (Feb. 12, 2021), https://www.bestcolleges.com/blog/coronavirus-impacts-on-students (reporting many students have suffered a “massive surge in stress and anxiety”).

3 See generally A Call for Accountability and Action: The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z Survey, DELOITTE 13, https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/2021-deloitte-global-millennial-survey-report.pdf (last visited Dec. 22, 2021) (examining top pandemic-related causes of stress, according to Jan. 2021 survey of millennials and Gen Zs). Half of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-three reported in the early days of the pandemic that they or a family member lost a job or took a pay cut due to the pandemic shutdowns. On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know about Gen Z So Far, PEW RES. CTR.
My family largely escaped illness and other serious problems. For me, the biggest shock was moving from in-person teaching to online teaching. Notre Dame announced on March 11, 2020, that students, then on spring break, should not return to campus and would finish the semester online.\(^4\) Online classes would commence March 23, to give professors time to adjust to online teaching. Thus began Emergency Remote Teaching.\(^5\)

Cengage Learning, Inc. kindly gave all students free online access to the textbook. In the space of ten days, fearing I would become ill myself, I recorded six weeks of Business Law lectures on Zoom, to be accessed by students asynchronously. The university recommended asynchronous delivery to accommodate students now spread across the globe, operating in different time zones. The back-and-forth of Socratic method became me, pausing, and then answering my own questions. I jettisoned an in-class group exercise on sales contracts, not knowing how to conduct it remotely under the circumstances. Toward fostering some student interaction, I created a chat room on Sakai and invited questions and discussion, but not a single student posted there. I held virtual office hours and live review sessions via Zoom. Students continued to submit homework on Sakai, as they had done previously. Exams were administered on Sakai. Because students would not be taking the exam simultaneously, as a security measure, questions were randomized and the exam was linear,\(^6\) which many students found frustrating.

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\(^4\)Notre Dame was not alone in such a move. See, e.g., Charles Hodges et al., The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning, Educause Rev. \(^2\) (Mar. 27, 2020), https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning (noting that hundreds of “institutions of all sizes and types—state colleges and universities, Ivy League institutions, community colleges, and others” had moved online “to help prevent the spread of the virus”).

\(^5\)Pedagogy experts coined this term in the early days of the pandemic. Id.; Lauren Glenn Manfuso, From Emergency Remote Teaching to Rigorous Online Learning, Ed Tech Mag. (May 7, 2020), https://edtechmagazine.com/higher/article/2020/05/emergency-remote-teaching-rigorous-online-learning-percon. Emergency Remote Teaching is: [A] temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. Hodges et al., supra note 4, at 10.

\(^6\)“Randomized” means that each student answered questions drawn from a larger pool of questions. Thus, no two exams included the same questions, and no exams had questions in the
All in all, the disrupted spring 2020 semester went well. Students were kind in course evaluations. They mentioned particularly my frequent emails, setting clear expectations, offering help, inviting questions, and expressing concern for their well-being. I was surprised to hear how much students appreciated campus photos I sent with some emails. My most popular attachment was a video of a herd of deer grazing on the main quad next to our Main Building. “They made me feel less homesick,” said one student, and others conveyed similar sentiments.

The ensuing 2020–2021 academic year was in many ways more difficult than the disrupted spring 2020 semester. Notre Dame students returned to campus. Most students attended class in-person, distanced and masked, but those in quarantine or isolation or with health problems or who could not obtain a visa to travel to campus attended via Zoom.\(^7\) We called it “dual mode.”\(^8\) Inevitably, several students in each section attended virtually. There were tech glitches. More troublesome, I found it difficult to look after Zoom students while delivering a good class to those in the room. Those on Zoom were reluctant to speak up with questions or otherwise to participate in discussion. Even the students in the room seemed reluctant to engage. I had trouble learning their names when they were masked and sitting far away in a dark auditorium. We all did the best we could under the circumstances.

That brings us to the 2021–2022 academic year. The fall semester is winding down. The pandemic continues, but most classroom restrictions here have ended, largely due to the requirement that all students be vaccinated.\(^9\) Masks are optional. We are back in our normal classrooms with no

same order. “Linear” means Sakai displayed the questions one at a time. Students could not revisit a question once they moved on to the next question. Students had a four-hour window in which to complete the exam. Once commenced, students were required to complete the exam within sixty minutes. Unlike my normal exams, this exam was open-book and open-note. Students were not allowed to work together or to speak with anyone about the exam during the four-hour window.

\(^7\)Notre Dame’s course delivery thus was primarily in person. In fall 2020, twenty-three percent of colleges were primarily in person. Four percent were fully in person. Forty-four percent were primarily or fully online. Twenty-one percent offered hybrid delivery. See Here’s Our List of Colleges’ Reopening Models, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Oct. 1, 2020), https://www.chronicle.com/article/heres-a-list-of-colleges-plans-for-reopening-in-the-fall/ (surveying nearly 3000 colleges).

\(^8\)Notre Dame Learning, Resilient Teaching 3.2 Dual Mode: Accommodating Remote Students, NOTRE DAME, https://resilientteaching.nd.edu/prepare-for-fall-teaching/day-to-day-teaching/dual-mode-accommodating-remote-students/ (last visited Dec. 22, 2021).

\(^9\)See Dennis Brown, Notre Dame to Require Students to Be Vaccinated for COVID-19 Beginning with Fall 2021 Semester, NOTRE DAME (Apr. 7, 2021), https://news.nd.edu/news/notre-dame-to-require-
distancing. No more dual mode. All students attend in person. Quarantines have been rare.10

It is a relief to be back to relatively “normal” operations.11 But the pandemic teaching experience has reinforced certain lessons and brought lasting changes to my course.

I. BETTER USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Most notably, I have learned to embrace technology. Sakai, Google Forms, Calendly, and Zoom are useful tools now. No more paper handouts—all extra readings and resources are linked or posted on Sakai. Students submit written assignments there. Group signups and mid-semester surveys are handled efficiently via Google Forms. Students schedule office visits via Calendly. Students not able to attend evening review sessions in person can watch a recording on Zoom. While classes are normally in-person, Zoom came in handy when I found myself ill the first week of class (not COVID). To stay on schedule, I provided an asynchronous Zoom lecture.

students-to-be-vaccinated-for-covid-19-beginning-with-fall-2021-semester/ (noting available exemptions for medical or religious reasons).

10During the fall 2021 semester, 191 undergraduates tested positive for COVID. Notre Dame Covid-19 Dashboard, Notre Dame, https://covid.nd.edu/dashboard/ (last visited Dec. 22, 2021).

11Other colleges and universities in fall 2021 adopted different approaches with regard to mandating vaccines, online options, and COVID-related restrictions such as masking and distancing. See, e.g., Nick Anderson et al., Campus Celebration and COVID Fear: Colleges Reopen for a Second Fall under the Pandemic Shadow, Wash. Post (Aug. 26, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/08/26/college-fall-opening-covid-pandemic/ (noting around one-third of college students attend institutions with vaccine mandates); Elizabeth Redden, How Online Learning Fits in This Fall, Inside Higher Ed (Sept. 3, 2021), https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/09/03/momentum-behind-person-fall-where-does-online-learning-fit (recounting plans of numerous institutions); Omar Abdel-Baqui et al., Princeton, Cornell, Others Urge Students to Head Home Because of Covid-19 Outbreaks, WALL ST. J. (Dec. 15, 2021), https://www.wsj.com/articles/covid-19-outbreaks-disrupt-princeton-cornell-end-of-term-11639590864 (“A sharp rise in Covid-19 cases on several campuses is prompting some colleges and universities to reinstate remote learning and require booster vaccination shots, upending the last days of the fall term”). At some institutions, more courses are online than before the pandemic. For example, pre-pandemic, “about ten percent” of City University of New York (CUNY) courses were online; in the fall 2021 term, fifty-five percent are available online. CUNY’s provost stated that the university is “in transition” back to in-person learning. Redden, supra. In light of their COVID experiences, some institutions will move permanently to more online courses. See Nick Anderson, The Post-Pandemic Future of College? It’s on Campus and Online, Wash. Post (Sept. 28, 2021), https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/09/28/post-pandemic-university-online-classes/.
I employ technology partly because it is good for the environment and efficient. Partly, however, I use it to signal to students that I am not a “dinosaur.” I am open to the technology they find so useful and familiar. This is in my self-interest. In a recent study of undergraduate experiences with Emergency Remote Teaching, a respondent stated, “Even if professors were not tech savvy, they had to be willing to learn.”\textsuperscript{12} That is a reasonable point.

II. CHANGE IN ATTENDANCE POLICIES

For several years prior to the pandemic, a portion of my students’ grades came from attendance. Much pedagogical literature addresses the benefits of attendance\textsuperscript{13} and assesses the wisdom of mandatory attendance policies.\textsuperscript{14} Credé et al. observe “encouraging evidence that mandatory policies are not necessary for dramatically improving class attendance or class performance.”\textsuperscript{15} Allowing students to determine attendance themselves shows respect for them as young adults.\textsuperscript{16} Further, it allows them “to vote with their

\textsuperscript{12}Susan W. Parker et al., COVID-19 Campus Closures in the United States: American Student Perceptions of Forced Transition to Remote Learning, 10 Soc. Sci. 62, 76 (2021). See also Bridget J. Crawford & Michelle S. Simon, Law Faculty Experiences Teaching During the Pandemic, 65 St. Louis U. L.J. 455, 468, 466 (2021) (noting many law professors’ sense of “technological insecurity” and advising “hiding from technology is no longer optional”). I certainly have felt technological insecurity. When things do not go smoothly, I am not shy about calling our tech help desk or even asking my students for real-time advice.

\textsuperscript{13}See, e.g., Marcus Credé et al., Class Attendance in College: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Relationship of Class Attendance with Grades and Student Characteristics, 80 Rev. Educ. Res. 272, 288–89 (2010) (“Class attendance appears to be a better predictor of college grades than any other known predictor. . . . Indeed, the relationship is so strong as to suggest that dramatic improvements in average grades (and failure rates) could be achieved by efforts to increase class attendance”); Valentin Kassarnig et al., Class Attendance, Peer Similarity, and Academic Performance in a Large Field Study, 12 PLoS One 11 (2017), at 1 (noting correlation of class attendance and academic performance).

\textsuperscript{14}Credé et al., supra note 13, at 282–87; Kelli Marshall, Why I Don’t Take Attendance, Chron. Higher Educ. (Oct. 12, 2017), https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-i-dont-take-attendance/.

\textsuperscript{15}Credé et al., supra note 13, at 287.

\textsuperscript{16}Id.; Marshall, supra note 14.
feet” on the quality of teaching. If they view class as not worth their time, I should reassess my methods and content.

These strike me as compelling reasons to give students autonomy, and postpandemic, we can add another: mandatory attendance policies may provide perverse incentives to attend class when ill and possibly contagious. As a result, I no longer take attendance. To incentivize preparation and attendance, students earn points by submitting homework for each class and participating in class discussion. Students have assigned seats, and if I notice repeated absences, I reach out to that student. Happily, attendance and participation in the fall 2021 semester remain excellent.

III. IN-PERSON INSTRUCTION

Pedagogy experts stress the importance of “teaching presence,” manifest when “students and [professor] interact successfully with each other and with the course materials in a way that create[s] a cognitively meaningful learning environment.” The professor has “cognitive presence,” through effective design of course materials and assignments and skillful moderation of classroom discussion. The professor also develops “social presence” by building “interpersonal connections” with students. Social presence comes when the professor shows some personality and evidences care and respect for students.

17 Marshall, supra note 14 (quoting Murray Sperber, Notes from a Career in Teaching, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Sept. 9, 2005), https://www.chronicle.com/article/notes-from-a-career-in-teaching/).

18 Ida M. Jones, Can You See Me Now? Defining Teaching Presence in the Online Classroom Through Building a Learning Community, 28 J. LEGAL STUD. EDUC. 67, 80 (2011).

19 Types of Presence: Teaching Presence, U.C. DAVIS, https://canvas.ucdavis.edu/courses/34528/pages/types-of-presence-teaching-presence (last visited Dec. 22, 2021).

20 Id.

21 See Carmen Carrillo & Maria Assunção Flores, COVID-19 and Teacher Education: A Literature Review of Online Teaching and Learning Practices, 43 EUR. J. TEACHER EDUC. 466 (2020), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02619768.2020.1821184?casa_token=fsResu8K6ccAAAAA%3AkqGrYDjGwB5SCt8jX1IKNcCTAxAb1CnB2BOK48AJAcpSGNv-XLLUc54AqY_3zUoIk-5pO8mufHoz (summarizing literature on social presence in teaching).
This call for care and respect brings to mind Pattison, Hale, and Gowens’ advice on connecting with students. They cite the importance of “valuing student opinions,” “knowing student names,” “taking a personal interest” in students’ lives, treating them as colleagues, and showing “empathy, encouragement, and fairness.”

A proficient instructor can build teaching presence in an online class but it is so much easier face to face. The pandemic experience has caused me especially to appreciate in-person instruction. Judging by their classroom demeanor and willing participation in class discussion, students prefer it as well. I serve students better when able to see understanding or questioning in their (unmasked) faces. I value chatting with them informally before or after class, getting to know them and hearing what they care about. It feels like we are a community of learners. I feel newly invigorated at this opportunity to be back in the classroom.

22 Patricia Pattison, Janet Riola Hale & Paul Gowens, Mind and Soul: Connecting with Students, 28 J. Legal Stud. Educ. 39 (2011).
23 Id. at 52–60.
24 Id. at 53–54. See also George Siedel, Seven Essentials for Business Success 185–213 (2022) (noting that effective professors model among other qualities authenticity, humility, kindness, empathy, approachability, availability, and fairness).
25 See, e.g., Types of Presence: Teaching Presence, supra note 19; Secil Caskurlu et al., A Meta-Analysis Addressing the Relationship Between Teaching Presence and Students’ Satisfaction and Learning, 2020 Computers & Educ. 157 passim; Holly Fiock et al., Instructor Impact on Differences in Teaching Presence Scores in Online Courses, 22 Int’l Rev. Res. In Open & Distributed Learning, Aug. 2021, at 55 passim; Jones, supra note 18 passim.
26 In numerous surveys of college students evaluating Emergency Remote Teaching during the spring 2020 term, students expressed strong preference for in-person instruction. See, e.g., Marcus, supra note 1 (citing survey of 14,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with 67% preferring in-person courses); Trang Nguyen et al., Insights into Students’ Experiences and Perceptions of Remote Learning Methods: From the COVID-19 Pandemic to Best Practice for the Future, 6 Frontiers in Educ., Apr. 2021, Article 647986 (reporting on survey of almost 5000 undergraduates, with 86% preferring in-person courses). Compare Digital Promise, Suddenly Online: A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic 6 (2020) (reporting on survey of over 1000 undergraduates about Emergency Remote Teaching, indicating “Students’ ratings of their satisfaction with their courses [that semester] after moving fully online were dramatically lower” than when the courses met in person), with Hodges et al., supra note 4, at 1 (“Well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis.”). For guidance on effective design and delivery of online legal studies courses, see generally Jones, supra note 18; Lucas Loafman & Barbara W. Altman, Going Online: Building Your Business Law Course Using the Quality Matters Rubric, 31 J. Legal Stud. Educ. 21 (2014).
IV. CONCLUSION

This short essay records some history of a remarkable time. The pandemic jolted normal operations throughout academia and, as I experienced, in my business law classroom. The pandemic years were difficult but also brought benefits. For me, the pandemic prompted, indeed forced, reexamination of methods and practices in the classroom. I have become more tech savvy and will avoid attendance policies that may compel sick students to attend class. The pandemic also led me newly to appreciate the joy of being in the classroom—which comes mostly from the personal interactions with bright young students. I will be a better teacher for having experienced the pandemic years.