The Silver Lining of a Pandemic Disruption in Academia

VICKY V. JOHNSON

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has undoubtedly been a disruptive force resulting in many challenges. However, disruptions are also learning experiences and can bring innovation and progress. As a department head, I have often heard, “We’ve always done it this way” or “We’ve never done it that way.” Changing “this way” to “that way” can be an uphill battle. A disruption in our old ways of doing things has been forced onto all of us, but perhaps some of these new ways will prove to be silver linings.

The Cloud
Before identifying silver linings, we must first acknowledge the cloud. There is no way to emphasize the gravity of the pandemic to the communities of the world and that thus extended to each personal life. People have lost loved ones, lost jobs, suffered illness, and faced fear, uncertainty, and exhaustion. To attribute a silver lining to such a devastating global event is not intended to minimize or overlook any hardships but only to enlist the optimistic spirit of those who build on what has been learned.

Silver Lining: Health
Perhaps an ironic result is that we have learned to support our health in ways that were not typical prior to the pandemic. Masks are now a common sight. No one is surprised and few are judgmental upon seeing people who routinely wear masks. The stigma is gone, and the practice is common to both protect oneself and others. “Contactless” became a standard practice. Assignments were submitted online, graded online, and returned online. Hand washing is more deliberate rather than perfunctory and has a more concrete association to actual consequences.

The practice of staying at home when symptomatic has new respect. The days of pushing through a cold or flu and showing up for duty as a noble behavior will hopefully be put aside. The focus on protecting others has replaced the idea that the infected one is the only sufferer. Rather than thinking of health as only a personal condition, the pandemic has taught us to consider the common good as part of the decision-making process.

Silver Lining: Time Management
Our most valuable resource is time. It is indisputable that Zoom meetings save time. Prior to the pandemic, it was assumed that a face-to-face meeting was always a superior choice. Now we have learned that the choice can be made based on distance, efficiency, meeting length, participants, preference, and meeting type. We are also aware of how much time we spend traveling when there are multiple options for interaction and communication beyond the days and weeks that are spent in expensive travel. Working from home has long been a point of contention. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the process has been thoroughly beta-tested, and decisions can be made based on efficacy and results rather than on bias and assumptions.

In a general sense, our experiences in lockdown, isolation, and quarantine have slowed us down, at least temporarily, allowing us to rethink busyness. We have a better idea of what our busy lives—our scrambling to be here and there—has actually cost us, and busyness has faded as a badge of honor or a token of importance.

Silver Lining: Improved Content Delivery
Compelling a tenured faculty member who is determined to maintain the status quo would normally be a challenge, but the pandemic required faculty to teach remotely, having no choice but to participate in this technology. Subsequently, the benefit continues once the barrier of the learning curve has been crossed.

In disciplines where the development of skills was central to learning, students abroad trips, interviews, and other proceedings were canceled or reinvented as remote events. In our department, we were able to use those savings for student scholarships. We also bought student instruments, had instruments repaired, and renovated our dance studio. We were able to hire guest speakers at substantial savings to give master classes via Zoom.

Silver Lining: Access and Inclusivity
The inequity of digital access became evident when classes went online. Students in less privileged circumstances and in rural areas are less likely to have access to broadband and devices. It is difficult to see this as a silver lining, but the pandemic has identified this problem as a real chance for reform and has ignited a groundswell for investment in this infrastructure.

Another access issue is college admissions. During the pandemic, universities admitted students without requiring SAT or ACT scores, paving the way for lower-income students who have not had the advantages of test prep to enter those institutions. Deemphasizing these standardized tests is one step toward more equitable college admissions.

Students with chronic health issues and deployed military personnel found the remote classroom to be just what they needed. During emergencies and temporary shutdowns, it is now possible to quickly convert classes to remote learning rather than to discontinue classes in cases of inclement weather or building inaccessibility caused by flooding, power outages, or structural damage.

Silver Lining: Cost Savings
Ironically, in addition to budget cuts experienced by academic institutions early in the pandemic, there were also cost savings related to the pandemic. Conferences, study
watched videos of themselves that they sent to faculty or shared with classmates. They noticed things to improve and even did assignments multiple times to get a better product.

During the semesters of HyFlex teaching, when all class content was recorded, faculty also had the opportunity to watch their own content delivery. It was easy to observe the need to be more concise, less chatty, less boring. Faculty were able to identify areas to enhance and improve, and student learning outcomes became more central. Pedagogy based on “the way I was taught” had to be set aside in favor of “the way that will work.” Some of those latter ways continue to survive and evolve.

Silver Lining: Innovation
My personal experience in innovation was in fine arts, which includes very skill-based and interactive content areas. Art and digital media students used Zoom meetings to share their work with faculty for inspection and critique. Instrumental ensemble members wore masks with slits just wide enough to put their instruments to their lips and covered the bells of the instruments to limit aerosol transmission. Ensembles moved to larger spaces so that students could sit six feet apart and rehearsed for thirty minutes before moving to another space so that the air purifiers could clear the air. The choral ensembles rehearsed virtually and included collaboration with singers from universities across the country. These virtual choirs were a feat of organization and synchronization and gave students training and performance opportunities that they would otherwise have never experienced. The theater productions were chosen so that the actors would be able to stay six feet apart wearing clear visors and microphones. One play was conducted outdoors, and another show was performed as a radio play, which was broadcast on our local NPR station.

No one preferred this mitigation. The point is that faculty and students took the initiative to invent new processes that retained the essence of the learning objectives in their content area.

Silver Lining: Collaboration
As everyone was grappling to find strategies to carry on, faculty ventured beyond their silos to bring in fresh ideas from colleagues across the country. Zoom meetings were used to confer as well as to share plans, strategies, and challenges that we were all facing. In the fine arts, ensemble directors reached out regularly to their colleagues for strategies to keep students safe while continuing to perform. For example, our choral director was very quick to set up the technology necessary to put together those virtual choirs and then led online trainings through podcasts for colleagues nationally and beyond to produce virtual choral works for their own choirs.

Silver Lining: Gratitude
The process of quarantine and social distance has made us hyperaware of the value of our relationships. There was a pent-up demand and appreciation for personal face-to-face interaction when vaccinations allowed us to come back together. It was palpable that we were aware of the profound impact of fear and isolation and that it was a gift to return to any semblance of normal. In higher education, we experienced a sense of belonging to a common chaos in a veritable educational dystopia while trying to keep the educational process in motion.

Those spared from budget cuts and job loss are more aware of the privilege of steady employment and have reached out to others in support. The distribution of CARE funds to students has been an opportunity to be involved in their support on many levels. It is interesting to consider that our students may also be learning adaptive strategies that will serve them in their own future challenges. It has been our silver lining to have the opportunity to walk with them through this learning process.

Conclusion
It is clear that there are new ways to function within academia for students, for faculty, and for administrators. It is not expected that traditional practices will ever be completely replaced, nor should they be, but the innovations and alternatives that we have learned and experienced have expanded the reach of our institutions. The lessons we have learned, the new things we have tried, and the indomitable spirit of those invested in teaching and learning have been the light that has caused the silver lining of the pandemic cloud.

Vicky V. Johnson is associate professor of music and head of the Department of Fine Arts at Tarleton State University. Email: vjohnson@tarleton.edu

Chair Tip

Power Listening
Most of us have learned that talking is linked with power, such as in winning a debate, promoting an idea, teaching a course, or giving a professional seminar, and once we’ve been selected to serve as chair, it may feel like we’re expected to speak more. However, veteran chairs often learn that it’s actually more powerful to listen rather than to talk. Consider the wise old department chair sitting back with their fingers folded under their chin listening and processing the depths of a conversation or a group’s interaction—reading faces, monitoring politics—growing ever more knowledgeable and thus also more powerful than those who can think only about what they want to say next. And when this chair does speak, it may be that it will be only to ask questions so that they can listen yet some more and speak only to confirm that they understand their colleagues and the reasons why they feel the way they do. By listening this way, they will literally be gaining control over the situation as well as the outcome. They will know where the misunderstandings are and how to resolve them. To listen is to be both wise and powerful; to talk is often to appear foolish and inadequate.

—R. Kent Crookston is former professor and director of academic administrative support at Brigham Young University.