

## **Pandemic Dispatches #5**

### **Thinking About the Days Ahead: Flexibility with Ourselves and Others**

This week's Pandemic Dispatches gives us some wellness advice and shares perspectives on the process of final exams in this unprecedented time.

#### **Good Enough is Good Enough**

It will soon be summer, even though it does not remotely feel like it. With that, this semester will be behind us, but the lessons will be with us for the rest of our careers. Whatever we have learned, struggled through, or been frustrated by have likely made us better educators: more aware, more humane, more committed. Perhaps some of us are the most tired that we have ever been, the most stressed, and the readiest for a few weeks off that we could ever imagine ourselves to be. However you are feeling, you are valid in this moment. I have seen a number of memes suggesting that we should have new syllabi done for new courses, a new craft or hobby in full swing, and a completely remodeled/renovated home and if we don't, that it was never time we lacked, it was self-discipline. I really want to push back on this. Some of us are managing households, homeschooling children, and/or caring for elderly or ill family members. Wherever you are right now, you are okay. A very wise person once said to me "sometimes good enough is good enough" and that has stayed with me. We can let good enough be enough right now.

#### **Avoiding Burnout**

This incredibly timely piece from Inside Higher Education talks about the importance of focusing on purpose, compassion, connection and balance in times of uncertainty and how this can help you more effectively cope with everything that is happening. For more, follow this link: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/28/advice-faculty-help-them-avoid-burnout-during-pandemic-opinion>

#### **Remember Places?**

Where is the one place you wish you could go right now? For me, it is my regular spin class. A sweet, sweaty, Monday night spin class at Riverwalk Athletic Club is the first place I want to go once it is truly safe to do so. Email us at [professionaldevelopment@sunybroome.edu](mailto:professionaldevelopment@sunybroome.edu) and tell us the one place you wish you could go right now. We will use these to develop a Wordle as part of a future edition of Pandemic Dispatches.

## What Do Final Exams Mean During a Pandemic?

In a typical semester, Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh's chemistry students take a comprehensive, 40-question, multiple-choice final exam. The chemistry department at Central New Mexico Community College, where she is a full-time faculty member, gives a common test in many of its courses to signal to health-profession schools that its online courses are worthy prerequisites for their programs.

Even when she teaches those courses online, Sorensen-Unruh's students take their exam on paper, in person at a testing center staffed with a proctor. Such arrangements aren't possible now, with in-person instruction halted because of the coronavirus, so the department waived its common-exam policy.

Count finals among the many rhythms of academic life that have been disrupted by the pandemic. For some professors, at least, rethinking their finals under duress has raised questions about whether their usual approach was the best one in the first place.

Sorensen-Unruh, for one, wasn't sold on a multiple-choice exam as the best way to measure learning. She used the new flexibility offered by her department to give her students a choice. They could complete a take-home exam. They could write a five-page essay on what they learned in the course and their learning experience during the pandemic. Or, once Sorensen-Unruh signed off on their plan, they could complete a project. (Sorensen-Unruh offered similar options to students in her statistics course, which has more flexibility.)

Students differed in what kind of work they were capable of this spring. They differed in how much they would need to draw on the material from her course in the future. Giving them options, Sorensen-Unruh thought, made good sense.

It was going to mean a lot more work for her, especially when it came to grading. But she thought it would be worth it.

### Other Options

Where should professors rethinking their approach to finals begin?

Kevin Gannon, who directs the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Grand View University, has this advice: "I think the first thing we need to do is ask ourselves: What are the learning goals of the final exam, or the final project?"

After that, says Gannon, who is also a history professor, faculty members can look at their typical exam and ask: "'Is this the only way I can get to those outcomes, or are there other options?' And chances are, the answer is there are other options."

For some professors, this can mean a dramatic change, like moving from a multiple-choice test to a flexible list of options. For others, it's more about taking one more step on a path they were already walking down.

That was Jen Heemstra's experience. Heemstra, an associate professor in chemistry at Emory University, was already giving open-book, open-note exams. That practice stems from her conviction that the skill students will really need is accessing and applying information, not memorizing it. This semester, she and her co-instructor took an additional step: giving students more time.

"It seemed really unfair to try to have a rigid timeline," Heemstra says, "realizing that students can't necessarily control whether they'll be available at that time, whether they'll be able to work uninterrupted." Plus, she says, students could run into glitches downloading the exam or uploading their finished work. The course's final should take students about an hour, but the instructors will give them 48 hours to complete it.

Just about everyone is facing some degree of challenge this semester, so it's a natural moment for professors to rethink how different groups of students are affected by various pedagogical choices. "As we emerge from this," Heemstra says, "and start to have a chance to reflect, it's a really good time for us to think about how we might create more equitable learning-assessment tools all of the time."

### A Meaningful Activity

Reflection can help professors improve their teaching. It can also help students deepen their learning. This semester, professors might ask their students what they're taking away from their courses — and from learning under these unprecedented circumstances, Gannon says. "Any way to get them engaging metacognitively," Gannon says, "I think could be really helpful."

That's the direction Christopher Jones took. Jones, an assistant professor of history at Brigham Young University, didn't make many changes to the final in "Colonial American Family History," which he was teaching for the first time. Sure, students could look up information on the internet if they really wanted to. But BYU has a strong honor code, and any students who didn't follow it, Jones figured, were only hurting their own learning. He wasn't about to police them.

Jones did make one change, adding a question that asked students to reflect on their experience during the pandemic, and how it will shape their approach to studying family history. The question isn't simply academic: The university offers a bachelor's degree in family history and genealogy, and students go on to work at companies like Ancestry or Family Search.

The course, Jones said, covered disease and widespread death and family separation. "And all of a sudden, here we were living amidst a worldwide pandemic, where they were either separated from their families, or suddenly living with their families again for those students who returned home" — perhaps having thought they'd never live there again.

Finals have wrapped up at Brigham Young, and Jones has already read his students' exams. There were a wide range of responses, he says, "all of which were really interesting, but also moving, and, sometimes, heartbreaking."

As he neared the end of a difficult semester, reading his students' reflections made grading finals a meaningful activity for Jones. He has already saved them on his computer so he can revisit them later. He is, after all, a historian.

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