

## **Pandemic Dispatches #3**

Communicating Kindness in a Pandemic, Finding the Joy, Spring Break, Life On Zoom!

### **Communicating Kindness in a Pandemic**

Earlier today, I was chatting with a colleague about Starfish stuff and mentioned how overwhelmed I was feeling. I've been on Zoom meetings, performing student outreach, doing class prep, offering professional development remotely, answering an influx of emails, etc. every day for the last three weeks and most days for the week before that. At the same time, I have a son in NYC and two more at home navigating the transition to distance learning, eating all of the food as though it were a race, and asking me to drive them to Target.

I don't know who else needs to hear this but she said to me: "Just remember, you're not 'working from home', you are 'at home in an emergency situation, working to the best of your ability.'"

Whether or not you know how to share a Google doc, or even you incorrectly spell something in a document that is shared far and wide (I miss my proofreaders), we're all doing our best in trying times.

### **Finding the Joy**

Many of you may be finding that your craft, your passion, the reason why you get up in the morning has changed as a result of moving to distance education. The Chronicle has posted a wonderful article that is geared toward finding the joy under uncertain and almost unrecognizable conditions; you can use this link to learn more: [How to Recover the Joy of Teaching After an Online Pivot.](#)

### **Spring Break (and not a moment too soon)!**

One of the things we can easily do to recharge is, to the best of our ability, take spring break off. Many of us worked at breakneck speed to get everything up and running in a short time, and have been working tirelessly to adjust and refine the education we are offering. Spring break is a good time to get some much needed rest and relaxation, and store our energy for the final push through to the end of the semester. If you can't take the full break, do what you can to put up an away message for a day or two, and if you are in a position to, schedule fewer meetings for this week.

## Is There Life on Zoom?

Does it seem like you now conduct most aspects of your life on Zoom? Beckie Supiano from The Chronicle of Higher Education explains how that's added to experts' discomfort with videoconferencing as the default mode of remote instruction.

In a recent interview, a professor used an expression I'd never heard before, but I immediately knew what it meant. The expression was "Zoomed out," and Adriano Udani, an associate professor of political science at the University of Missouri at St. Louis, was describing the way his students feel about the transition to emergency online teaching.

Zoom, of course, is the videoconferencing program many colleges have made available to professors thrown into the deep end of online instruction. And they're not the only ones Zooming: In these days of social distancing, Zoom is the new home of everything from preschool circle time to office brainstorming sessions to long-distance happy hours.

Udani's students are in a master's of public administration program and often have jobs and families to manage, too, he said. They are taking classes at night. But they really wanted to be taking them in person.

"Having back-to-back classes, staring into your computer, after working a full-time job is a lot," Udani said.

I immediately thought of Udani's comments when I saw a [tweet](#) from Mike Caulfield, director of blended and networked learning at Washington State University at Vancouver, last week. "You know how wiped you feel after that series of Zoom-call meetings you had today?" he wrote. "Because it's a lot of the energy of face-to-face without many of the psychological rewards of face-to-face? That is your students, too. Consider other ways of communicating."

When I emailed Caulfield and asked him to elaborate, he wrote back explaining that part of the issue was the way in which many colleges had rolled out their switch to remote instruction.

"This change to online happened not only suddenly, but in a series of waves," he wrote. "And so initially faculty were looking for something to get them through a couple of weeks, and maybe Zoom was that. But then the situation evolved, and now we're in full course delivery, with multiple issues around stay-at-home orders, community bandwidth, shifting student schedules. And we haven't had time to take a breath and reorganize for that."

Caulfield pointed me to Tanya Joosten, senior scientist and director of digital learning research and development at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Joosten spoke with me last week, despite being on the mend from Covid-19 (an experience she's written about in some detail on Twitter in an effort to combat misinformation about the pandemic). Her analysis: Professors flocked to real-time videoconferencing because it feels, at first blush, like the best stand-in for teaching face to face.

But this is not the best way to teach online, says Joosten, who also co-directs the National Research Center for Distance Education and Technological Advancements.

Joosten sees several problems with relying too heavily on video-conferencing tools like Zoom. First, she says, there are questions about whether these programs will be able to work reliably at this kind of scale. Then there are logistical questions about students' ability to access this kind of technology or commit to being available at a particular time during the pandemic — which raise concerns about equity. That will be even more of a challenge, Joosten says, as more people get sick.

Another risk: Videoconferencing tools end up encouraging “teacher-centered learning,” Joosten says. While these platforms are meant to facilitate multiway interaction, she says, they effectively collapse into one-way communication after a certain number of people join in.

“You and me and four of our colleagues can jump into a Zoom room — OK,” she says. “Thirty of us jump into a zoom room — how interactive is that?”

So what should professors do instead? Joosten, like other experts, recommends getting down to the essentials — “What do I want them to be able to do by the end of the semester?” — and working backward from there. She thinks the best plan is to put students into small groups — which can interact well on video — and have them work on projects together.

“When you put students in small groups,” she says, “there’s peer learning. They can utilize each other as tech support. It’s just a much better way to go than trying to have these large-group, synchronous, live sessions to replicate the face-to-face.”

By Beckie Supiano