

Roundtable

TEACHING ONLINE IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

This roundtable, the second installment in our “In Practice” series, takes as its focus the formidable challenge of online teaching in the age of COVID-19. Many of us had never ventured far past our institutional virtual-learning platform before on-campus teaching was suspended in spring 2019, while still others have been employing innovative online pedagogies for some time. This forum draws on the experiences and expertise of a range of Americanists to offer reflections on teaching American studies online, from seminar teaching, to US and African American history, to settler colonialism, and the importance of accountability and accessibility. By the time this roundtable is published, online teaching will have been our lived reality for many months. We hope our readers find something of themselves in these contributions, written as they were at the start of the 2020–21 academic calendar.

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Despite questions about how cost-effective it is, the seminar remains one of the most valuable forms of teaching for both lecturers and students in the humanities. As opposed to the frequently passive learning that students can encounter in lectures, the seminar allows them to practice a range of higher-function skills that are vital for their development as critical thinkers. The Socratic method is just one of the many tools lecturers employ in the seminar to help students find their voice, but the smaller size of the seminar also permits us to be more creative in how we prepare students for life beyond the academy by developing exercises that hone a wider variety of transferable and employable skills. Seminars are also invaluable for students to develop personal relationships that are necessary for collaborative work and peer-to-peer learning. For lecturers, the seminar is also essential, as its regularity and size allow us to keep track of the engagement and progress of individual students over the module.

It is precisely because of their intimacy that seminars are the form of teaching that has most concerned teaching staff as we prepare for an unprecedented academic year. Social distancing or the fact that some students and staff are in

vulnerable categories and may be shielding means that the traditional seminar will have to be reconsidered. Most institutions of higher education have advertised that while abiding by government regulations they will offer a combination of digital and face-to-face teaching, but even this is not guaranteed. The coronavirus outbreaks we have seen on American campuses and adjacent communities as universities began their semesters have already forced institutions such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to reverse their existing plans for any in-person teaching. Because of the likelihood of eventual local or national shutdowns, lecturers elsewhere will need to embrace the fact that online education will be the main form of teaching they will be delivering for the foreseeable future.

Fortunately, the development of the Internet and the expansion of online teaching since the early 2000s have produced a wealth of pedagogical research that can help us adapt to this new reality and change our approaches to better suit this medium. For example, the existing scholarship highlights the troubling fact that online teaching takes around twice as long to prepare and deliver as face-to-face.¹ At the same time, however, much of the existing literature on this subject relates primarily to the context prior to the pandemic when digital teaching was intrinsically different, and so cannot always be applied directly. For instance, the average student profile, as well as their expectations and motivations, is different. One recent statistical review of the changing profile of undergraduate online learners in American higher education between 2000 and 2012 revealed that while there are notable variations, students who were employed full-time, married or a parent “were often more likely than their peers to enrol in some online courses and fully online programs.”² Another review from 2006 found similar results, but also emphasized that students who enrolled on online courses were also “highly motivated and focussed on achieving specific learning outcomes,” and older than typical undergraduates.³ On the other hand, the profile and motivations of this COVID-19 generation of students are likely to be very different as they have less choice, and these factors will need to be considered when it comes to developing online teaching.

¹ Mansureh Kebritchi, Angie Lipschuetz, and Lilia Santiague, “Issues and Challenges for Teaching Successful Online Courses in Higher Education: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 46, 1 (Sept. 2017), 4–28, 19.

² Justin C. Ortagus, “From the Periphery to Prominence: An Examination of the Changing Profile of Online Students in American Higher Education,” *Internet and Higher Education*, 32 (Jan. 2017), 47–57, 52.

³ Mary K. Tallents, Julie A. Thomas, William Y. Lan, Sandi Cooper, Terence C. Ahern, Shana M. Shaw, and Xiaoming Liu, “Teaching Courses Online: A Review of the Research,” *Review of Educational Research*, 76, 1 (March 2006), 93–135, 112.

Scholars agree that one of the key challenges of digital teaching is the transition itself. Adam Fein and Mia Logan identified three separate phases where staff will encounter challenges in this transition that are worth considering separately when it comes to reconsidering the seminar: the design stage, the delivery, and the follow-up. In the design stage, lecturers will need to think carefully about the new environment that they and their students are working in, and avoid the temptation of thinking that materials and instructions can be seamlessly transferred to digital platforms, which can in turn raise further issues in the delivery stage. For one thing, most staff will need to carefully evaluate their materials to decide what exercises can be assigned to asynchronous teaching and how they can be designed to enhance the discussions taking place in the limited time available during synchronous seminars. When it comes to delivering these materials, staff will eventually encounter the foreseeable technical problems regarding connectivity but should also recognize that it is likely that students will respond differently in digital seminars than expected. For instance, while students can interact with staff effectively in synchronous seminars, getting students to prepare and collaborate equally in groups for asynchronous tasks without constant supervision will likely be a challenge. Finally, in the follow-up stage Fein and Logan identify the “in-the-can” syndrome; that is, the failure to revisit and improve your online materials after they have been delivered. For seminars, it is critical that we continue examining our approaches and reconsidering our successes throughout the term to develop and promote best practice.⁴

When it comes to the design stage, it can be helpful to plan seminars according to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe’s backward design process, whereby the intended learning outcomes remain the same, but we work backwards to design exercises and opportunities that fit this virtual environment.⁵ This may prove especially challenging for most of us who have limited experience delivering seminars online to undergraduate students, particularly since the traditional seminar was so important for our own development as scholars and educators. One examination of online teaching argued that, among other things, variety in the forms of learning and emphasis on higher thought processes are key for effective instruction.⁶ As well as breaking up our digital platforms with multimedia and interactive materials to provide a change of pace to text-based forums and secondary readings, there is a wealth of free or trial software available that can help make seminars less

⁴ A. D. Fein and M. C. Logan, “Preparing Instructors for Online Instruction,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 100 (2003), 45–55.

⁵ A. Cundell and E. Sheepy, “Student Perceptions of the Most Effective and Engaging Online Learning Activities in a Blended Graduate Seminar,” *Online Learning*, 22, 3 (2018), 87–102, 89.

⁶ Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago, 13–14.

repetitive. Digital whiteboards where individual students can write comments and pin images can promote collaboration and engagement, while also producing materials that can summarize content which students can employ later. The list of such teaching software appears to be growing every day as the demand explodes, so it is advisable that lecturers continue reviewing what is available and sharing with colleagues the tools they have employed successfully. The role of the lecturer is still critical to guide discussions and to test higher function skills, but in this case technology such as wiki platforms or polling software can help provide variety and should be factored into our seminar and module design.

Because of the pressures of digital teaching, asynchronous activities are going to be a necessary component to ensure that synchronous seminars function effectively and that valuable time is not misused on exercises that can be completed beforehand. Asynchronous tasks can include discussions on digital forums to prepare students for live discussions or assigned group work where students develop peer-to-peer learning. One crucial element for the successful delivery of asynchronous tasks is the lecturer's presence and feedback on progress. When it comes to posing questions and discussions on digital forums – a popular exercise meant to replicate elements of a seminar's Socratic debate in a staggered fashion – the timely response to student posts helps to keep students engaged in this extended activity.⁷ However, one of the most oft-cited issues with these digital forums is the limited engagement, wherein only a select or small number of students post their thoughts. Some institutions may be able to ensure equal engagement by making such digital forum posts a form of summative assessment, but for others whose modules cannot be reaccredited in time there are still options. In my own teaching, I am planning to split my individual seminars into smaller groups for such digital forums, whereby each group will be tasked with posting a certain number of words each week to set questions or exercises. To ensure that all students contribute, the individual groups will have a rotating leader who will be tasked with arranging discussions with their group and posting their replies. Furthermore, it is my hope that by providing timely feedback on their posts, students will recognize how their contributions to these formative exercises can assist them in their summative assessments. At the same time, though, researchers have argued that infrequent posters are not necessarily "passive recipients" and that some students will benefit more through "vicarious learning"; that is, by observing the active dialogues between

⁷ A. Sun and X. Chen, "Online Education and Its Effective Practice: A Research Review," *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 15 (2016), 157–90, 166, 169.

others on such forums.⁸ Taking this into account, lack of participation in such asynchronous learning should not automatically be considered lack of engagement, but will have to be supervised in other ways if we are hoping to promote a learner-centred approach that takes into account the needs of our students.

The careful planning of asynchronous activities and clear instructions about how to prepare should go a long way in laying the groundwork and ensuring that the actual live seminar can focus on the critical discussions and exercises that make this form of teaching so valuable. However, the best-laid plans can still go awry, particularly with a diverse group of students with different learning styles and expectations. It is because of this that in my own teaching I will have to rely heavily on anonymous student feedback. I have already undertaken a few practice seminars with some of my final-year students whose feedback has assisted me greatly in adjusting elements of my plans for the successful delivery of the necessary intended learning outcomes. One valuable suggestion was to avoid requiring students to mute themselves during live seminars. While background noise can be annoying for participants, it can also inhibit students from jumping into discussions and stall the natural flow of the dialogue. Regular feedback should already be a critical component of any learner-centred approach, but in these circumstances it is also a valuable resource. Through their social channels students often know more about what our colleagues are doing in other modules and will feel more engaged with your own teaching if they see that their thoughts are being considered and that the course is being adjusted to their needs.

Digital teaching presents unique challenges, meaning that administrative and academic staff in higher education are being asked to exert themselves further to deliver this year's teaching programme. Nonetheless, we should also recognize that students themselves are also under unprecedented pressures as they undertake a new academic year. More than ever, we need to make accommodations for the uncertain obstacles and potential disruptions that both staff and students are likely to encounter as we embark on this academic year. In my own case, I am planning to make a very clear statement of the social contract between me and my students regarding our new duties and responsibilities, all while reinforcing this agreement with a degree of flexibility. Students need to know that the highly experimental nature of the digital project means that not everything will go as I planned, but at the same time that I will also be more responsive to their requests and accommodating of their needs, considering the context of the pandemic.

It is my hope that, by recognizing and accepting our collective situation, lecturers and students can work together to develop modules that, while

⁸ Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago, 10.

challenging, still provide the sort of engaging seminar discussions and in-depth analysis that we all enjoy and which allow learners to develop into critical thinkers. The seminar, whether delivered face-to-face or through our computer screens, remains the key forum where we can develop these necessary skills. The contemporary situation in the United States – the political upheaval and protests in the wake of the death of George Floyd and many others, the upcoming presidential election, and the social and economic uncertainty and personal tragedy induced by the pandemic – will no doubt increase demand for courses in American studies, even if they are mostly digital. It is a crucial moment for Americanists, and one where I hope we can all rise to meet its unique challenges.

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Online learning requires a time commitment and a skill set that are different than teaching a face-to-face course. In my experience, students choose an online method because she/he/they have employment, family, or military time commitments that prevent them from attending in-person classes. Because their time is limited, they must have the information that they need to succeed at any time of the day or night. They also have little time to resubmit assignments if they receive a low score. One of the biggest challenges to teaching online is to evaluate the needs of a class that you never see in person. To overcome this obstacle, you can study the demographics of your student body, anticipate the skills that students at your institution typically have yet to develop and be flexible with curriculum and course assignments.

As an instructor at multiple open-enrollment institutions, my responsibility is to design my courses with the information that my online students need to complete work and meet objectives with limited confusion. That means that I must anticipate what my students' needs are as I curate the curriculum and design assignments. I prepare for online course instruction by knowing the demographics of the institutions where I teach. I teach to a diverse demographic of students. Many of my students struggled in high school. Others struggle with mental illness. Some come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Still others struggle from undiagnosed learning disorders, anxiety, depression, an eating disorder, PTSD, or some other trauma-related disability. Many of my students are English-language learners as well. Every semester I have students who are unable to write a complete sentence or paragraph or who lack a basic understanding of the rules of grammar, syntax, or style. Some students have a limited vocabulary. You, too, have students with similar backgrounds as those who attend the institutions where I teach. Too

often, instructors assume that all students have the same educational background. All too often, our students are unprepared for several reasons. Our job, then, is to recognize that not all students are ready for the academic classroom, to assess what their educational needs are, and then to adjust our courses to meet their needs. Our students need us to design courses that can help them to develop the skills that they need to succeed academically, civically, professionally, and even in their personal lives.

Organization and predictability are essential elements of a successful online class. My online courses are arranged weekly in the modules section of my course management system. Each week begins on Monday and ends at 11:59 p.m. on the following Sunday. Discussion responses are due on Thursday, with engagement posts, also known as participation posts, due by no later than Sunday night. Assignments are due by midnight every Sunday. Discussion and engagement posts draw students into conversation with one another by offering multipart prompts. Students also complete assignments that are designed to help them learn how to analyze primary and secondary sources, how to identify a historical argument, and how to write and support their own argument. I adjust my discussion prompts and assignments often when I recognize that my students are struggling with a certain concept or need more instruction in a specific area.

One way that I help my online students learn history and to become more critical readers is to assign readings from a course textbook. There are many debates about the effectiveness of assigning a course text. While I have listened closely to my colleagues' pro- and anti-textbook arguments, I have gained the most informative information about textbook usage by asking my class if they prefer an assigned text. Once a year I assign a survey asking students if they prefer a course textbook. The majority of responses indicate that my students rely on the textbook to develop a basic understanding of the topics we discuss during the course. Since I teach United States history, my students find comfort in having access to an inexpensive textbook that they can refer to before each class. Many first-generation college students and English-language learners are unprepared for college life. Textbooks are an easy-to-read reference that often serves as a source of information and security as they transition into the academic world.

Another technique I use to enhance student learning is to write and record weekly instructional materials that I post every Monday. My instructional materials clarify assignment instructions and provide examples of assigned work, and I use videos to demonstrate how to complete work for my visual and audio learners. One challenge that I face is that many students overlook the instructional materials before they complete their work. To address this issue, I send an email every Monday to remind the class that the instructional materials are available. I also design detailed rubrics and hold student work to

each rubric. Students who overlook or forget to engage with the weekly instructional materials usually begin to study the instruction once they review lower rubric scores. In short, during the first two weeks of class, I hold students to rubric expectations. Those who reviewed the instructional materials do well. Those who did not learn the importance of engaging with all of the course instructional materials.

Weekly instructional materials are also essential to personalizing your course and making it more engaging. By adding the instruction each Monday, I prove to my students that I am not just a “grader,” but an instructor there to help them to succeed. It is important that the instructional materials are clear and short. When I feel that my written materials might require my students to scroll down through several screens, I will break the information into two separate instructional posts. My instructional videos consist of a screencast, where I use a variety of presentation methods to demonstrate course concepts. For example, during the second week of my historical-methods course, I begin with PowerPoint slides that outline the differences between primary and secondary sources. I then transition to an Internet browser where I demonstrate how to use the college library’s website to search for sources. I have found that students enjoy the screencast method (as opposed to recording myself teaching) because they can focus on the content on the screen while listening to my voice in the background. Student evaluation responses typically reference the videos as “helpful” teaching tools. It is important to tailor your weekly educational materials to fit the educational needs of your students. In short, while my students should know how to write an essay or to search for relevant sources, I must not assume that they have these essential skills. While I am frustrated when my students are not prepared to succeed in the college classroom, my goal as an educator is to teach them what they need to know to do well in all of their classes.

Another challenge that I face is how to get my students to engage on the discussion board. I define a discussion post as a prompt that includes a complex question related to the weekly topic. An engagement post is a reply to a classmate’s initial discussion response or to another student’s post. I improve student responses and engagement on the discussion board by requiring the use of in-text citations for their initial response and at least two engagement replies. The discussion prompt includes a component that challenges students to apply the historical material to a contemporary issue or experience. Together, these prompts provide my students with the opportunity to use evidence to discuss a historical topic, which is similar to how I execute discussions in my face-to-face courses.

By requiring the use of cited evidence, I challenge my students to think deeply about their responses before posting them. A common complaint

I hear from instructors and students about online discussion boards is that posts are generic, with little quality content. For example, students have told me that they often complete engagement posts just to “get the work done,” rather than to further the conversation. Generic responses sound similar to “I like your post! I will now summarize your post! Thanks for sharing your post! Again, great post!” Requiring cited evidence pushes students to think critically about the discussion and engagement topics and to support their ideas with details they draw from the weekly reading materials. In short, the discussion board enables students to continue to develop critical-thinking skills and to practice composing and supporting a historical argument.

For example, during the spring 2020 semester, my students responded to a discussion prompt titled “Domestic Containment vs. Quarantine.” In the prompt I provided an overview of the containment policy and a summary of historian Elaine Tyler May’s main argument regarding domestic containment from her book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988). I then embedded two Cold War videos, titled *Duck and Cover* (1951) and *Dating Do’s and Don’ts* (1949), into the prompt. I ask the students to compare and contrast the videos and apply their contents to the concept of domestic containment and to our weekly reading about the Cold War. The students were also prompted to consider containment in relation to quarantine using any meme, TikTok, social media post, newspaper article, or other type of recent publication or video that they feel best demonstrates their experience with the COVID-19 quarantine. In their responses to at least two peers, I asked the class to talk about how the pandemic had affected their lives and how current issues compare to what people experienced during the Cold War. Because the students can relate to the material, discussion and engagement posts are detailed, often lengthy, and well cited. From my view of the discussion, it appears that the students enjoyed thinking about how people in the past addressed stressful situations in comparison to our current situation.

My responsibility on the discussion board is to model good writing and to introduce new ideas and information to my students. The discussion board is an essential place for me to provide the class with ideas and concepts I would normally deliver during a lecture and discussion in a face-to-face class. I typically reply to at least half of my class of up to thirty students each discussion week so that my presence is fully noted on the discussion board. For example, in my American Environmental History course, the discussion prompts require the reading of primary sources pertaining to different historical time periods. In my replies to other student responses, I will connect the ideas they presented to books, primary sources, and journal articles I have read about the same topic. I use in-text citations and analysis in my responses. I also choose not to respond right away to give my students a chance to

guide the discussion. Student evaluation responses often reference my discussion board posts as interesting learning material, meaning that students have said that they learned from my posts and often looked forward to reading them each week.

Because my students rarely responded to my posts, I initially worried that they either ignored them or found them boring. However, it appears that the opposite happened. Students found my posts to be key parts of the weekly instruction. Student evaluation responses indicate that students looked forward to reading the posts but chose to respond to their peers rather than to my posts. Therefore teaching takes place in a variety of ways in an online class. Our mission is to identify how our students learn best and then adapt our teaching style to meet their needs.

Online teaching is a challenging but rewarding endeavor. The biggest stumbling block is to evaluate the educational needs of students whom you do not interact with in a face-to-face setting. To overcome the lack of in-person interaction, it is important to study your institution's demographics and to gain a basic knowledge of the education system in the state or region in which you teach. By gaining a general knowledge of student socioeconomic and educational background, you can begin to tailor your assessments and instructional materials to best meet their needs. Online teaching is also rewarding as you get to know the students through their academic achievement. I learn student names by interacting with them on the discussion board and reading their weekly work. I enjoy watching their writing and critical-thinking skills improve over time.

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On 13 March 2020, Breonna Taylor, a twenty-six-year-old African American emergency medical technician (EMT), was killed by Louisville, Kentucky police officers serving a “no-knock” search warrant after midnight. At the time, her death was largely ignored by national media. Today, most of us know Taylor’s name because of the 25 May 2020 police killing of George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African American man in Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹ Floyd’s murder ignited mass global protests in solidarity with

¹ The lack of initial attention to Taylor’s case compared to the mass global protests ignited by the Floyd murder was apparent. As black feminist and queer activists and historians have long argued, African American women are just as likely as black men to be victims of police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. But they receive half the amount of public outrage, sympathy and calls for justice. Historical studies on African American women

the Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013. The violence of the state against black Americans is a historical and contemporary crisis. The murders of Taylor and Floyd are examples of a rolling archive of structural antiblack violence—both hidden and concrete. As educators of African American studies, we repeatedly confront this crisis in our pedagogical practices. Teaching black history is a political act. When you're a black professor and scholar-activist, it means teaching with urgency, critical distance, empathy and *eloquent rage*.² It means helping young adults trying to make sense of their world learn how to channel their rage as agents of social change. I invoke the names of Taylor, Floyd, and so many others, to affirm black life as I reflect on teaching black history online between a global pandemic and mass protest against racial injustice.

It's not lost on me that the crisis of state-sanctioned antiblack violence evident in the deaths of Taylor and Floyd bracket my unexpected trial with teaching black history online. On 11 March 2020, the president of the small liberal-arts college where I teach in the northeastern United States announced the university's decision to suspend in-person classes due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. As an assistant professor of African American studies, I took emergency pedagogical flight and refuge online. It was the second week of spring break. I was at the midway point of the second semester of my first year on the tenure track. Fresh out of grad school, my teaching experience was limited and I was predictably spending the majority of my time on course preparation. The announcement to move our courses online, therefore, was scary. I was glad that my employer was among the first to take this crucial public-health measure. But I was worried about what moving online would mean for the integrity of my courses and for my first-generation low-income (FGLI) students, most of whom are black and Latinx. Looking back at the moment, I think about how the relative public silence around Taylor's death subordinated, or perhaps temporarily stayed or *invisibilized*, the ongoing crisis of state-sanctioned antiblack violence. In this pause, I, along with many others, directed my attention toward the (seemingly) separate crisis of COVID-19.

and police state violence include Kali N. Gross, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); and Cheryl D. Hicks, *Talk with You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).

² The term “eloquent rage” is borrowed from black feminist scholar and activist Brittney Cooper. See Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018).

I was in the middle of teaching two courses. One of the courses was a 200-level survey titled Intro to Modern African American History, 1877 to the Present. It was capped at thirty-five students. The other course was a smaller, 200-level elective on Intimate Histories of Black Women. Here, I had around twelve extremely bright students. With topics related to race, gender, sexuality, black feminist theory/intersectionality, power, and the state, my courses tend to attract students who are social-justice-oriented with advanced cultural literacy. These young adults come to my courses in search of meaning, to understand their own experiences and the historical trajectories of the communities they're from. A large number of my students identify in some way with the historical subjects or subject matter. Some seek my courses as a corrective to their lack of exposure to, and critical engagement with, African American history at high school. Others seize the rare opportunity to take a class with a black female professor as part of their elite education. I'm a black British woman from a working-class, immigrant family, and a former first-generation student. I'm attentive to my unique positionality within an elite, predominantly white institution (PWI) in the US.

The first action that I took following the president's announcement was to build and distribute an anonymous survey among my students. As a starting point, I imagined the challenges I would have faced while completing a semester at home as an undergraduate student. I drafted questions like, "Do you have regular access to high-speed Internet?" "Do you have any concerns about different modes of learning (i.e. synchronous/asynchronous)?" and "If given an opportunity to switch grading modality from A-F to credit/unsatisfactory, would you take this option? If yes, why?" I was sure that there were factors I'd not considered, so I was intentional about inviting my students *early* to assume agency in rebuilding our classroom online.

The survey proved to be the most powerful tool for re-creation. I learned so much from my students – about their learning styles, challenges and concerns. Around a third of my students reported that they didn't have access to reliable, high-speed Internet at home. There were students seeking authorization from the university to remain on campus due to housing insecurity or concerns about returning home to high-risk relatives. Some students were worried that they wouldn't be able to focus at home. This was especially the case for those who lived in large-family households, had limited privacy, or were expected to take on familial commitments such as babysitting siblings since they were no longer "in school." Of all student responses, most expressed their sadness and disappointment over losing the dynamic, in-person classroom environment we'd collectively cultivated. The responses made me realize the levelling power of physical campuses. On campus, every student has access to a host of basic resources, from libraries to high-speed Internet to accommodation. In light of news of how COVID-19 exposed the deep

structural racial and class inequality in the US (and the UK), these early insights from my students were critical.

Between student responses, the unexpected and rapid transition to remote teaching, and the uncertainty of the moment, I decided to reconstruct my courses with asynchronous lessons. I reduced course readings, revised assignments and moved deadlines. I followed the recommendation of the university and my department to allow students to choose between A–F and credit/unsatisfactory as their preferred grading mode. That this divide fell along racial and class lines said a lot. We all faced continuous challenges, so I aimed to be as flexible as possible. Each Monday, I uploaded PowerPoint slides and short videos onto the course websites. I opted to create shorter videos where I focussed on a concept or a question rather than longer lectures. I did this for a few reasons. First, short, three- to five-minute videos enabled students to work through the weekly material at their own pace. Second, with little control over their home/work environment, I think shorter videos made lectures more portable. And third, if I struggled with distraction and general anxiety during lockdown, I knew that my students were no more able to maintain their concentration. Delivering short videos also worked for me as a professor.

In addition to teaching asynchronous lessons, I hosted a non-mandatory weekly virtual town hall via Zoom. The virtual town hall was the space in which I sought to foster community. With students' consent, I recorded each Zoom meeting. In my AFAM survey, we covered themes such as "The Modern Black Freedom Struggle," "Black Electoral Power and Racial Retrenchment" and "The Obama Promise." As we moved chronologically toward the present moment, the sense of "history in real time" became palpable. My students increasingly incorporated personal anecdotes into their reflections. A few mentioned discussions they'd recently had with family members. This made me think about how online classes often reach entire households beyond the student. Ultimately, I fashioned the town hall in the powerful tradition of black community engagement: from churches to front porches to barbershops to the kitchen table. Each of these sites reminded me that any space can be built into a classroom. The everyday pragmatism in African American community and political engagement inspired me to be innovative in my online black history courses.

Overall, my stint with crash-teaching black history online was as successful as it could be given the circumstances. If my students and I dragged our way past the end-of-semester finish line amid the exhaustion and precarity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of mass global protests against racial injustice and the tearing down of racist monuments regenerated the exigency of black history. Early in the summer, I determined that I would teach remotely in the fall. I was fortunate that my department and university left it to

professors to choose their preferred teaching mode – no questions asked. I know this was not the case for colleagues at other universities, where the pressure to teach in person in the fall fell especially on junior tenure-track and contingent faculty. Thus I spent some of my summer in workshops and conversations about best practices for teaching online.

In fact, I write this contribution as I complete the first week of the fall 2020 semester. I'm teaching two 200-level remote courses on *The History of Race and Sex in America* and *Gender and Slavery in the Atlantic World*. Each course is capped at nineteen students. As much as I learned from crash-teaching online in the spring, the design of my fall courses is considerably different. For one thing, I don't have the foundation of half a semester of in-person instruction like I did in the spring. I knew that I needed to implement ways to build an active online community. I opted to teach synchronous classes and I have students accessing PDFs of course readings via Perusall, a "social e-reader" platform – which I love. Through Perusall, students read collaboratively. Their annotations, highlights and questions all appear in one place for the whole class to see. I've found this a powerful way to help alleviate the potential isolation and distress of reading especially dense theoretical pieces or heavy topics, such as slavery.

Of course, I'm going into these courses with more questions than answers. For example, I think about what it means to teach a course like *Gender and Slavery* online. Students often struggle to establish some critical distance in the study of slavery. It takes a lot of invisibilized, affective labor on the part of professors, especially black women professors, to steer students toward this point. What does this labor look like in online form? Similarly, my course on *Race and Sex in America* has me thinking about matters related to privacy and politics. As I write this, news of a ban on "white privilege" and "critical race theory" trainings across federal agencies blots my social media timeline. Not only is there little understanding of the difference between corporatized "diversity and inclusion" programs and critical race theory as a robust intellectual framework, but the association of such terms with "un-Americanism" is troubling.

Privacy – my own and that of my students – is always an issue, whether in person or online. But how does one reconcile the intimacy that comes with the territory of teaching a course on the intersection of race and sexuality, where students often "see themselves" in historical subjects, with the "involuntary" intimacy of Zoom meetings taking place in a childhood bedroom? For example, my queer students often speak poignantly about what it means for them to learn about queer historical subjects. In an online space, I can't assume that students who are out on campus hold the same identity at

home. In terms of privacy, politics and parents/guardians,³ I've aimed to build syllabi that reflect the academic rigor and intellectual questions central to my courses while respecting that some content may be deemed inappropriate within some households. For example, instead of requiring that all students in my Race and Sex in America course participate in the section on "Pleasure Economies and Race Play," which includes readings on BDSM and pornography, I'm offering an alternative option.

Teaching black history during a global pandemic and mass protests against state violence and racial injustice has only strengthened my conviction that black history seriously matters. Though my area of expertise is in African American history, as a black Brit, I'm equally energized by the movement to make black history a mandatory part of the National Curriculum. There is a hunger and readiness in all of my students this fall, whether they're black, white, Latinx, queer, straight, cis- or trans*. I'm excited and I'm ready for them.

Wesleyan University

KAISHA ESTY

It is almost funny, and certainly curious and worth thinking about, that the crossing of an ocean or interacting across a two-metre barrier, while vastly different in scale, are so similar in effect. In teaching American studies outside the USA – in my case from the UK – we have always had to deal with distance. How to connect our students both intellectually *and* emotionally to the peoples and places we study is no new challenge, and while there is no one foolproof approach (nor could there be) to facilitating these connections, many of us have found ways to help our students collapse this geographical and conceptual distance, and ignite their learning and engagement. But the introduction of an additional distance between us and our students due to the COVID-19 public-health crisis introduces new difficulties and, we hope, new opportunities. As I write, we are preparing and experimenting with online learning and flexible delivery at a scale previously unthinkable in higher/post-secondary education. We are also all dealing with personal, community, and institutional impacts of the pandemic, and many of us can expect sudden upheavals and new or unexpected challenges in the coming months.

³ I've had an interesting in-class experience that has influenced the way I've built my online fall syllabi. In 2019 I permitted a father and his daughter, a prospective student, to sit in on one of my classes. By the end of the class, the father expressed his concern over my students' calls to "dismantle" certain systems. While his daughter visibly enjoyed the class, I was reminded of the strong role that some parents and guardians play in their children's curriculum.

As we work to stay connected with our students and deliver the high-quality teaching and student engagement that are the hallmark of our discipline, we are not simply moving to a different kind of delivery, but rather are constantly solving problems, innovating, and at times just “making do.” There are real limitations to what is possible in these difficult times, but there are ways we can take advantage of the current support for online and flexible learning to improve key areas of our practice in teaching American studies, in ways supportive to students and the pressing issues facing our communities – from the local to the global.

In a crisis, education is key. Education can prepare people to seize their own liberation, to build better worlds in their own communities even as the wider world seeks their ending, and to make connections between struggles that can be the basis of future solidarities. The education that has been crucial through the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic is that of previous years and it prepared academic practitioners for situations if not exactly like this then at least similarly chaotic. But we now face a different reality: COVID-19 has not sputtered out, and many places that seemed to have successfully eradicated it amongst their populations are seeing explosive resurgences. While we try to deal with a virus that seemingly sprang from nowhere, we are also dealing with the much longer-term consequences of industrial capital as climate change causes extreme weather events and whole swaths of forest, jungle, and – yes – cities burn. These crises further expose the cracks in the American myth, and that of the UK, particularly the devastating ongoing impacts of white supremacy and colonization (including neo- and settler colonialism). Clearly, the COVID-19 crisis has not passed and is only one of the multiplying crises we face today.

Working from the UK, I am struck by the extent to which these crises are striking the USA and the UK hard and in similar ways. Both countries continue to deal with imperial legacies in the form of racism, xenophobia, massive class disparities, and reliance on (colonial) access to huge amounts of resources and labour for little cost. Our governments have also seemed to take a similar approach to the pandemic in that businesses and politics appear to take priority over public health. In both countries, everyone who opposes these social injustices, whether an educator or an activist, is having to reexamine their approaches and tactics in a world where gathering in large numbers can be fatal, where travel is curtailed and thus connections (particularly affective ones) are harder to make, and where public health is so reliant on the same governments that continue to discard and disregard black lives, migrant lives, and poor lives. The point is: we need to continue to pursue education that will see us to the end of these crises, and that includes continuing our educations on how to build a better world even as we educate others about the important facts and influence of America’s past and present.

Leonard Cohen was often profound, and I hear his words in my head as I write: “There is a crack in everything / That’s where the light gets in.” Writing, working, and living in and through this pandemic have helped me focus on what’s truly important in my role, and what is the business model of the neoliberal university constraining and influencing what we do in pursuit of profit. I have been so heartened by the American studies students who, despite the disruption to their own lives, the cancelation of their graduations, the struggles to study in isolation and without access to resources or other students to talk to, continue to be desperately concerned about racism, about climate change, and about the role of America in producing and responding to these crises. Yet at the same time, working as an educator in American studies, I cannot help but see that many UK universities are closing their American studies programmes just when we need these the most. The kind of analysis and skills we offer and develop through American studies are critical to understanding the changing geopolitical world as we witness the twenty-first-century spasms of American empire. They are also key to helping British students understand their own imperial legacies, as the British Empire did not just suddenly “end” and all of its harms become undone, as if Dorothy had tapped her ruby slippers together and woken up back safe and sound on the farm in Kansas. America, like Canada or Australia, among so many others, is a British legacy. I suppose I can understand why neoliberal institutions, beholden to whims of corporate capitalism and therefore as in thrall to American and British power as anyone, would not recognize the value of focussing on these topics, and widening access to these areas of study. But as I have continued my own education in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, and tried to continue teaching others, I have again and again found the cracks in “everything,” and I can see the light shining through. The more I myself learn about Britain and America, imperialism and colonialism, racism and capitalism, and the horrors of the “American century” that seemingly will not end, the more I am convinced that this is a light that we all need, and widening those cracks is worth fighting for.

I come now to the crux of the issue for many people who might agree that American studies is crucial in the context of COVID-19, climate change, and substantial shifts in racial discourses accompanying massive movements of migrants and refugees: how do we do this? The first challenge we face is of connection to resources, and the second is support and enthusiasm for this work. The first is the easiest to deal with, at least in theory, because Indigenous nations across Turtle Island (the name for roughly the continent of North America among the Haudenosaunee, on whose territories I was born and raised) have been dealing with exactly this problem for a long time and have already been developing important resources of just the kind that could share the education we so badly need to tackle the challenges in our present

and future. Since the consolidation of the whitestream settler colonial American state following the Civil War and opening of the West, Indigenous nations have increasingly dealt with enforced isolation, the scattering of their communities to small reservations, lack of access to or economic ability to develop transportation solutions, and an inability to access the governance of public institutions like education to make changes to how they are delivered. They have also been subjected to extreme levels of racism and violence among the settler population (especially, but not exclusively, white settler colonizers), and therefore enormous amounts of both intentional and environmental ignorance about Indigenous people and nations. This “cultural amnesia” affects Indigenous peoples, as their intergenerational methods of transmitting culture and knowledge were and continue to be deliberately disrupted by state and settler interference (direct and indirect). The response by many Indigenous leaders, innovators and educators has been to develop their own resources, to build spaces to tell their own stories, and to find ways to connect with those both in their communities and beyond who are willing to listen and learn, and contribute to just, decolonizing futures. Indigenous expertise is absolutely key to preparing learners across the world not only to understand the deep issues in America and American society, but also because it holds the possibility of teaching us new ways to find and widen the cracks that can let more light in – and help us see and work towards the changes and solutions we need.

The content that has been created and which is now accessible to almost anyone – even those of us distanced from the land and people in question by an ocean or by a pandemic-driven travel ban – is of extremely high quality and often created with the intention of reaching a wide and diverse audience. For example, the Haudenosaunee of upper New York State have developed a website called “Digital Wampum” (www.digitalwampum.org) with audio–video lessons on aspects of Haudenosaunee history, from the significance of the “Mohawk” (scalp lock) haircut and the team sport of lacrosse, to the founding of the Confederacy by a powerful being called the Peacemaker, to prophecies of environmental destruction that Haudenosaunee still seek to prevent. Digital Wampum is not just a lesson about the Haudenosaunee: it is the Haudenosaunee worldview in their own words, featuring some of their most respected leaders and knowledge keepers, and which inherently tells an obscured or hidden part of the American story: the history, persistence and survival of Indigenous nations despite the founding of America being premised on the belief that Indigenous people were doomed to (and should) disappear from the land. There are also some exceptional Indigenous scholarly communities within universities and educational institutions who are producing similar content but on a much wider scale and with more focus on directly contributing to anticolonial education. In an example from beyond the

borders of what is currently the USA, the Indigenous Portal at the University of Saskatchewan has brought together many seriously impressive resources that are – crucially – open-access or otherwise easily accessible (<https://iportal.usask.ca>). Because sites like this are designed and developed by scholars who know the struggle with distance – working across the chasms created by settler colonial violence, for many the distance between the reserve or the urban Indigenous community and the university might as well be an ocean – they are perfect resources for students and educators in the UK or elsewhere.

This brings me naturally to the second challenge that I mentioned above: finding support for this work. I imagine that I, along with many of my non-American colleagues and friends, would have liked to look smugly at the often intentional mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, except for the fact that the response by the UK government has been nearly as poor, or equally so. Throughout the responses of both national governments, and in the opinions expressed in tabloid editorials and comment sections, many of us find ourselves frustrated and deeply upset by the class- and race-based callousness that has quite literally resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands. What the light through the cracks has shown many of us is that those who are supposed to lead in America and the UK are instead followers – of money, power, influence, fame, or just sheer ego-driven petulance and whimsy. We must accept that the powers that be in the UK have no more interest in us teaching UK-based students about the truth of America than those in America do because, colonizers and capitalists, they remain joined at the hip, a whitestream transatlantic would-be empire. But while that means we will always be teaching American studies in a somewhat hostile environment, the pandemic exposes one part of larger shifts in what students want and need, and that is good news because few things make the marketized twenty-first-century about-face more than student – that is, “customer” – demand.

We know that our incoming students are concerned about systemic injustices, climate emergency, and the rise of fascism. We know we have a duty to teach those students what they need to know because it is their education that will determine our successes and failures in the crises to come. We have access to appropriate distance resources, especially Indigenous-developed resources, and also those created by other BIPOC groups and their allies, to help students understand how America and the UK really operate and how they connect through the pandemic, through racism and dispossession, capital, and climate change. And we have a motivated, angry, frustrated young population who have shown they will march for the environment and put their lives on the line against racism, and who are willing to make their voices heard by governments and university administrations. As long as

these students exist, I will keep at my own education, keep searching for new resources, and keep building new ways to connect with those students, because what comes next depends not on us, but on them.

University of Leicester

EMMA BATTELL LOWMAN

The final short story in Rion Amilcar Scott's excellent collection *The World Doesn't Require You* (2019) will be disturbingly familiar to many of us who work in higher education. "Special Topics in Loneliness Studies" is about a literature scholar, Dr. Simeon Reece, who turns his back on the indignities of a "year-to-year contract" and sets out to build a "shadow university" by dismantling his institution.¹ He sets out to "break" one of his colleagues, to make the colleague a "bomb left at the base of our dilapidated intellectual life" by forcing him to confront the humiliations and frustrations of academic life.² It is not difficult. Reece chooses as his prey Dr. Reginald Chambers, a colleague who is vulnerable because he "is far too invested in what [Paolo] Freire called the 'banking model' of teaching, viewing his students as empty vessels to pour knowledge into," and because Reece can appeal to his ego.³ Scott presents a familiar, but hyperbolic, fiction of the contemporary university that highlights the tensions between engaging, egalitarian pedagogy and enshrined structures of inequality and bureaucracy. Reece acts in bad faith, with devastating effect for Chambers's life. He is able to do so because Chambers, too, acts in bad faith, with similarly harmful implications for his students.

Neither character utters the phrase "blended learning," and there are no descriptions of a virtual learning environment that decides to break down at precisely the wrong moment, so the story's relevance to a discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic might not be immediately apparent. Nevertheless, I begin with this story because bad faith has characterized a certain mode of response to the pandemic and its impact on the higher-education sector. In the face of, for example, a US government official chiding Americans of colour for neglecting to call their grandparents or a UK minister blaming young people for a rise in cases, Americanists have a responsibility to act in good faith. In part, this means furnishing our students with the appropriate skills to understand the current moment, but it also means negotiating the structures of higher education to allow for truly inclusive teaching practices. The pandemic has come at a moment when UK universities have been, in

¹ Rion Amilcar Scott, "Special Topics in Loneliness Studies," in Scott, *The World Doesn't Require You: Stories* (New York: Norton, 2019), 155–302, 165, 170.

² *Ibid.*, 170

³ *Ibid.*, 281.

some cases belatedly, grappling with an infrastructure of inequality, and the need to collaborate with our students in good faith is as urgent as it has ever been. The pandemic has forced a series of fundamental and procedural shifts in how we think about our discipline, our teaching, and our research. At the same time, it offers an opportunity to enhance and codify good practice based on engaging students as intellectual partners in learning, with inclusive and egalitarian principles at the center of our practice.

The Brazilian theorist to whom Scott (very helpfully, for my purposes) alludes is Paulo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) is a foundational text in the development of higher-education pedagogy. Freire calls for a move away from the “banking model” of education, in which “education [is] an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.”⁴ Obviously, this is not a mode of teaching with which individuals are likely to self-identify. It is part of a fundamentally unequal teaching philosophy wherein “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”⁵ With the sudden move to blended learning, and an equally sudden compression of already limited preparation time, academics are in danger of falling into the trap of (forgive me) an online-banking model of higher education. Freire’s corrective to the banking model calls for a pedagogy that is “imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power” in which our “efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization.”⁶ While much of what Freire calls for – engaging students as partners in learning, conceptualizing education as a conversation – has become embedded in, and arguably reified by, contemporary higher education, such an inclusive model is the best corrective to the bad-faith response to the pandemic to which our students and ourselves have been exposed.

I can think of no better provocation for us to act in good faith than the fact that our students are already modelling good-faith, ethical academic citizenship. For a perhaps unlikely source of evidence we need only turn to no one’s favourite acronym: the NSS.⁷ Surprisingly stable returns for the National Student Survey in 2020 suggest a reservoir of student goodwill

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 2005; first published 1968), 72. ⁵ *Ibid.*, 72. ⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷ For non-UK-based readers, the National Student Survey is an annual ranking of students’ “satisfaction” with their institutions and programmes. Final-year students are asked to give feedback on their experiences at university by answering a number of questions relating to everything from library resources to whether or not they felt supported by academics.

that we must not abuse. Students largely ignored the pandemic and its impact as they made their opinions about the quality of the course known. As David Kernohan suggests, students saw this year's survey as an opportunity to signpost strengths and weaknesses to incoming and prospective students.⁸ Students are showing loyalty not to institutions or even to academics, but – and this is much more promising – to the civic engagement and good academic citizenship that higher education, and especially American studies, ought to foster. Of course, the NSS is an imperfect measure of inclusivity or accessibility, but it is important that we continue to monitor what students need, and how we can make what we offer more accessible for everyone.

In the UK, universities are contending with a changing landscape that precedes and runs parallel to responses to the pandemic. This year sees the next phase of implementation of the Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018. The first phase of implementation was relatively light-touch, with universities in the UK being compelled to publish an accessibility statement on their website that offers “an explanation of those parts of the [university's online] content that are not accessible and the reasons why.”⁹ If you study and/or work at a UK university, you may have seen an “accessibility statement” on your website, indicating where work remains to be done to make your online learning platforms more inclusive for people with disabilities. If a university acknowledges the limitations of its accessibility strategy by offering a clear *mea culpa*, there is unlikely to be any punitive or remedial action taken.

As I read it, there is something of a tension in how the regulations are conceived and put in practice. An acknowledgement of limitations is important, but it can also provide cover for complacency at a time when every effort should be expended to make sure learning is accessible to every student, regardless of disability or anything else. While the regulations purportedly aim to genuinely enhance accessibility, they may result in institutions simply describing rather than rectifying their accessibility shortfalls. Nowhere is the law's ethical hedging more disconcerting than in its inbuilt get-out clause. Institutions are not required to comply with the regulations “if doing so would impose a disproportionate burden” on the university.¹⁰ Since the

⁸ David Kernohan, “If We Can't See Pandemics in the NSS What Is It Good For?” *WonkHE*, 16 July 20, at <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/if-we-cant-see-pandemics-in-the-nss-what-is-it-good-for>, accessed 20 Aug. 2020.

⁹ Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 (SI2018/852), Regulation 7, at www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2018/852/regulation/7/made, accessed 26 Aug. 2020.

¹⁰ Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 (SI2018/852), Regulation 6, at www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2018/852/regulation/6/made, accessed 26 Aug. 2020.

onset of the pandemic, the “proportionality” has shifted. It is no longer sufficient (if it ever was) to suggest that providing learning material in an accessible format is too difficult. Students, especially students with disabilities who may be additionally vulnerable, are likely to have less access to on-campus learning, and the imperative to make sure we do not exclude any of our students from the digital classroom is a major responsibility. According to the legislation, universities will not be penalized for acting in bad faith, but our students will not be included. In a marketized sector, it is the responsibility of academic and professional-services colleagues to maintain communities of good faith with students.

In the contemporary moment, Freire’s banking model of HE pedagogy can take on a perverse literalism. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom begins *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (2017) with a poignant and personal anecdote of the author’s experience as an “admissions counselor” at a for-profit technical college.¹¹ McMillan Cottom recalls the predatory tactics she was forced to adopt in order to encourage would-be students to take on unreasonable amounts of debt for the promise of a career. The author recalls handing in her resignation and immediately calling a prospective student, urging him not to accept his place at the college.¹² McMillan Cottom models the kind of intervention academic and professional-services colleagues may be forced to make in order to ensure that students are incorporated into an academic community in good faith. Beyond specifically for-profit universities, there is a worrying trend toward transactional interactions with students across the sector, and especially in light of the pandemic, which makes it all the more important that we conceive of the contract between learners and teachers in inclusive terms. *Lower Ed* opens with a cautionary tale of an institution that does not encourage good-faith collaboration with students, but it also suggests how personal responsibility can make up an ethical shortfall. We will only be held accountable (by institutions, colleagues, students) for so much, and we can certainly be forgiven for triaging an inclusive approach to teaching at such a hectic time. However, American studies is built on convictions, and we should aim to be much better than whatever we can get away with.

Things start to fall apart for Scott’s Dr. Chambers when a student approaches him, in good faith, to discuss the material covered in a recent seminar. Chambers is dismissive and unwilling to engage the student intellectually on anything but Chambers’s own rigid terms. Higher education grinds to a halt, Scott suggests, when there is a failure of conversation. To offer a more

¹¹ Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy* (New York: New Press, 2017), 6.

¹² McMillan Cottom, 17–18.

positive formulation, the university is at its best when academics and students talk openly and on an egalitarian footing. The best way to meet the challenges I've outlined above is to talk our way out of them. If we, as academics and teachers, are to act in good faith in the face of the current challenges, the first step is to engage our students *as* students, involved in the intellectual labour of American studies. Freire calls for a pedagogy based on mutual humanization, and the first staging area for such a process is conversation. Students will be dealing with a range of anxieties this year, over and above the preexisting anxieties so many of us face, and we can help by talking. Students have chosen to study American studies, or one of its cognate disciplines, because they are interested in it. By starting conversations – about, for example, the pandemic, the election, the Movement for Black Lives – we are providing a space for students to begin to feel intellectually at home, which is crucial at a moment that is short on stability.

Canterbury Christ Church University

GAVAN LENNON

The students at Atlanta Metropolitan State College announced plans, as of 31 August 2020, to return to fully in-person instruction for the fall semester. The historically black Spelman College is online only for fall 2020, with no students on campus, as are the small and racially diverse women's Agnes Scott College and the two-year Atlanta Technical College. Georgia State University, with 32,000 students, is offering a mix of online, hybrid, and in-person courses. The more prestigious private Emory University, with about half that many students, is mostly online but with some in-person instruction.¹

These institutions are just a few miles away from each other in Atlanta, Georgia, a state that has repeatedly led the US in new COVID cases and is governed by a Republican who sued Democratic mayors who attempted to enforce mask mandates in their cities.² Despite the differences in their histories, missions, and student demographics, every college in Georgia is susceptible to a COVID outbreak, and yet they vary tremendously in how they assess and mitigate risk and how they plan to cope with inevitable infections on campus.

The diversity of responses to COVID isn't limited to Atlanta. Among the approximately 5,300 colleges and universities in the US, dozens of plans are in

¹ Davidson College, "Fall 2020 Plans," *College Crisis Initiative*, at <https://collegecrisis.shinyapps.io/dashboard>, accessed 31 Aug. 2020.

² Jeffrey Bluestein and Jeremy Redmon, "Kemp Drops Lawsuit against Atlanta over Mask Mandate, Coronavirus Restrictions," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 13 Aug. 2020, at www.ajc.com/politics/politics-blog/kemp-to-withdraw-lawsuit-against-atlanta-over-mask-mandate-coronavirus-restrictions/J7K32ZXQNFGR7ONDFRCYQHIROI.

place, with institutions within just a few miles of each other adopting dramatically different approaches. While different circumstances – urban versus rural; region of the country; availability of personal protective equipment, hospital beds, testing, and ventilators; private versus public institutions; residential versus commuter; two-year versus four-year – certainly shape differences in responses, ultimately the differences among institutions do not warrant the vast variation in reopening plans: 5 percent of schools fully online, 49 percent primarily online, 22 percent hybrid, 24 percent primarily in person, 4 percent fully in person, and 5 percent “other,” according to Davidson College’s online tracker as of 9 October 2020.

Colleges that have selected online-only instruction, with students living off campus, or predominately online instruction with very limited in-person courses, cite safety for students, faculty, staff, and their larger communities for their reason for keeping campuses closed. Colleges that are offering significant numbers of in-person courses cite student demand for classes,³ and the assurance that while infections are “inevitable,”⁴ the level of risk (risk of *what* is rarely specified) is manageable (*for whom* is also never specified; presumably, the university considers its risk to its priorities manageable, even if the risks it imposes on others are actually unmanageable for individuals killed or who live with lifelong injuries).

While some of these justifications can be simultaneously true – students can both demand classes and it can be unsafe for the communities where they live to reopen in person – they should not lead to such wildly different conclusions, with nearly equal percentages of colleges reopening fully online and fully in person. For example, African Americans are at much higher risk of death from COVID than are white Americans, a fact established early in the pandemic. This information justifies a decision to be fully online for Spelman, where nearly all the students are black, but it should equally justify closing Georgia State’s physical campus, which has a much larger total number, though smaller proportion, of black students. Differences between the two schools that matter in determining the mission of the school, tuition, course offerings, and other matters of academic and social life are irrelevant in the pandemic.

³ Conner Mitchell, “KU Survey Didn’t Ask if Students Wanted to Return to Campus; Claim of ‘Overwhelming’ Desire to Do So Was Based on Students Saying They Planned on In-Person Classes,” *Lawrence Journal-World*, 13 Aug. 2020, at www2.ljworld.com/news/ku/2020/aug/13/ku-survey-didnt-ask-if-students-wanted-to-return-to-campus-claim-of-overwhelming-desire-to-do-so-was-based-on-students-saying-they-planned-on-in-person-classes, accessed 13 Aug. 2020.

⁴ Chancellor Kelly Dampousse, “7 A-State Athletes Test Positive for COVID-19,” *KAUF*, 4 June 2020, at www.kauf.com/post/7-state-student-athletes-test-positive-covid-19#stream/0, accessed 4 June 2020.

To say it bluntly: coronavirus is no respecter of persons. While rates are higher among some populations than others, few college populations in the US are safe enough to justify widespread physical reopenings of campus. As Michael J. Sorrell, president of the historically black Methodist Paul Quinn College, argued in his explanation of why the Dallas school would not reopen face-to-face, “rushing to reopen our society and our schools is a mistake that will ultimately result in hundreds of thousands of citizens falling sick and worse.”⁵ Epidemiologists are broadly in agreement that the US reopened too fast, and the quick closure of Notre Dame, University of North Carolina, North Carolina State University, and other large schools that insisted upon reopening has confirmed that reopening has often been unsafe for students. Quinn’s warning in May was correct: a preprint publication of scholarship by researchers at University of North Carolina Greensboro, Indiana University, University of Washington, and Davidson College argues that approximately 3,200 positive cases of COVID *daily* in the US are due to face-to-face reopenings,⁶ a figure that is likely an undercount since it includes symptomatic cases with a positive test but not asymptomatic cases that were not tested.

To insist that the risk of face-to-face courses during a pandemic is acceptable is to overvalue the parts of campus life that we commonly assume to be most important to relatively few, relatively privileged students while downplaying the risks that a physical reopening presents not just to the majority of students but to our most vulnerable ones. The most privileged students have the least to lose with a physical reopening and also with an online one, but catering to their (assumed) demands to physically reopen puts those already at risk at even greater risk. On one hand, we have the desires of the most powerful for the social networking that reproduces and reinforces their power,⁷ and, on the other, the life-or-death needs of the least powerful.

⁵ President Paul Quinn, “The Nightmare That Colleges Face This Fall,” *The Atlantic*, 19 May 2020, at www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/will-college-campus-reopen/611794, accessed 19 May 2020.

⁶ Martin S. Anderson, Ana I. Bento, Anirban Basu, Chris Mariscano, and Kosali Simon, “College Openings, Mobility, and the Incidence of COVID-19 Cases,” *medRxiv*, 22 Sept. 2020, preprint, accessed 6 Oct. 2020.

⁷ See, for example, Anthony P. Carnevale, Martin van der Werf, Michael C. Quinn, Jeff Strohl, and Dmitri Repnikov, “Our Separate & Unequal Public Colleges: How Public Colleges Reinforce White Racial Privilege and Marginalize Black and Latino Students,” report of Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workplace, 2018, at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594576.pdf>, accessed 1 Oct. 2020. See also Barrett J. Taylor and Brendan Cantwell, *Unequal Higher Education: Wealth, Status, and Student Opportunity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

The reason for this crass weighing of life and death is financial. The shift of university funding from public to private sources is well documented, as two generations of students saddled with debt that has delayed the achievement of the traditional markers of adulthood, including homeownership, marriage, and parenting, can personally attest.⁸ Nearly half of total revenue at public universities is now from student tuition,⁹ and “public–private partnerships” are touted as evidence of “innovation” and “entrepreneurship” among university leaders. But canceled contracts with private companies for residence halls and dining services, as well as canceled athletic seasons and the revenue from their championships, have revealed how financially dependent universities are on revenue streams that are not pandemic-proof—and how little investment, including a bailout package, they can demand from state and federal governments. A related second factor is political pressure, especially in states with Republican legislatures and governors (who often appoint conservative governing boards), where the push to reopen colleges was part of a larger effort to deny the seriousness of the COVID pandemic.¹⁰

Universities have offered a host of arguments in favor of reopening that never name the financial or political pressure to reopen. Instead, they make two appeals: to the legitimate but not insurmountable difficulties of teaching and learning online (difficulties made worse when universities do not support or train faculty to teach online) and to the promise of a “college experience,” which is to say, the expensive amenities, costly athletic programs, and social opportunities (for friendships, sex, networking, partying). And yet, though the decimation of public funding is the primary reason for rising tuition, many parts of “the college experience” have contributed to the unsustainable rise in tuition.

This is because college students rarely select a specific college for courses offered or the professors teaching. Instead, college students who have the luxury of selecting a college—rather than simply going to the nearest, most affordable one that offers a degree of interest to them—are choosing their institution based on the reputation of the school, which may, again, be only tangentially related to its academics, and the “[insert university name here] experience.” University swim centers with lazy rivers or fitness centers with

⁸ Fenaba R. Addo, Jason N. Houle, and Sharon Sassler, “The Changing Nature of the Association between Student Loan Debt and Marital Behavior in Young Adulthood,” *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 40, (2019), 86–101.

⁹ State Higher Education Finances, *State Higher Education Finance Report, 2019*, at <https://shef.sheeo.org/report>, accessed 3 July 2020.

¹⁰ Madeline St. Amour, “Political Influence on Fall Plans,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 3 Sept. 2020, at www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/03/state-politics-influenced-college-reopening-plans-data-show, accessed 4 Oct. 2020.

tanning beds are the most outrageous examples of the amenities race and the quest to create “destination campuses,” but much of the promise of college marketing (and media representations of college) is an appeal to in-person peer relationships in a pleasant setting. Incoming students understand the differences in the amenities and dating and networking pool they are promised at schools they are considering better than they understand the differences among professors’ methodological, theoretical, or pedagogical orientation, and so differences in athletic teams (few of which generate revenue) or facilities or peer groups rather than academic concerns often shape their enrollment choices.

COVID threatens these promises – and thus the revenue scheme that neoliberal universities have come to rely upon. College campuses are cruise ships for young people – places *designed* to encourage physical interaction, from the dorms to the cafeteria to the stands in the stadium. And while my comments so far may have sounded critical of this prioritizing of sociation over academics, social connection supports learning; students with deeper connections to their campuses, including to their peers, have more motivation to do well academically (and, if they choose their friends wisely, more support to achieve it). As many graduates attest, significant learning happens not just in the classroom but in all the other spaces where students encounter each other’s diverse perspectives. And, unfortunately, also their germs.

Universities thus found themselves in a very hard place this fall: admit that the goods they’ve been selling students on for years – amenities, athletics, relationships – aren’t safe during a pandemic and lose revenue (and catch political flak that could result in even faster decline in state support) or insist that the university could reopen safely and guarantee “the college experience,” now with an asterisk leading to a well-hidden footnote that students would have to sign waivers releasing universities of liability,¹¹ that housing fees were nonrefundable, and that classes could be canceled and put online at any time anyway. Many chose some form of the second.

What is striking about this choice is that it preserves the cause of the problem that it is trying to avoid: the financial precarity of universities, which is caused, in part, by creating a unique (and expensive) “college experience” often advertised as nearly entirely social rather than intellectual (which is also social). This is frustrating for two reasons: first, the promised “college experience” is impossible this fall (as academic administrators well know and have known or should have known since midsummer) because that

¹¹ Kery Murakami, “Colleges Worry They’ll Be Sued if They Reopen Campuses,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 15 May 2020, at www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/15/colleges-seek-protection-lawsuits-if-they-reopen, accessed 15 May 2020.

experience relies upon physical closeness that is too dangerous during the time of COVID, and, second, it prioritizes the losses that our most privileged students fear over the losses that our most vulnerable students face.

In mourning the loss of “the college experience” – cheering on athletics, partying, Greek life, sociological assortative mating – we prioritize the concerns (or what we assume to be the concerns) of relatively carefree eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, people without partners or children or caretaking duties and without high-demand jobs whose health and wealth allow them to participate in college social life, including living on or near campus for the purpose of attending a school they selected primarily for social, rather than merely economic, reasons.

Yet this does not describe the average college student in the US. The average student is older, with children, learning part-time and working at least part-time, in an effort to improve their financial future. Their age, the financial pressure they face to work outside the home, their on average lower economic status, and their children’s presence in childcare centers or public schools all increase the risk of infection and illness or death.¹² Additionally, because these students are disproportionately people of color, they bear additional risks in a health system that is structurally and often interpersonally racist.¹³

To justify face-to-face reopening as meeting the social needs of lower-risk students while ignoring the real risks such a reopening imposes upon students already at higher risk is an act of injustice. Face-to-face reopenings present a great danger to those most vulnerable in order to satisfy students who are both more likely to survive COVID *and more likely to have the resources to learn online well anyway*. That is, an online-only reopening presents relatively little harm to the college student who can learn from home with high-speed Internet, no children clamoring for attention or for help with their own remote schooling, no elders to care for, no essential job to juggle or lost income to make up for; at the same time, it still presents a much better alternative to risky face-to-face learning for students for whom COVID is more likely to result in death or disability.

This injustice is also shortsighted. Declining enrollments even as the US population continues to grow (despite a declining birth rate that is likely to continue as long as college debt is unforgiven) are one factor in the

¹² A picture of the typical college student emerges from data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics’ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. The April 2020 data are available at <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/trendgenerator>.

¹³ Don Bambino, Geno Tai, Aditya Shah, Chyke A. Doubeni, Irene G. Sia, and Mark L. Wieland, “The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Racial and Ethnic Minorities in the United States,” *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, 20 June 2020, at <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa815>, accessed 5 July 2020.

financial insecurity of universities. Those most likely to say that a college education is “very important” are people over thirty, women, and racial minorities¹⁴ – the people most likely to also fall into the “nontraditional but typical” category of learners. In sum, prioritizing the concerns of the stereotypical but not typical student comes at a cost not only to the majority of students but also to the people who comprise the future of the university.

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¹⁴ Stephanie Marken, “Half in U.S. Now Consider College Education Very Important,” *Gallup*, 30 Dec. 2019, at www.gallup.com/education/272228/half-consider-college-education-important.aspx, accessed 12 Feb. 2020.