What Does a Good Teacher Do Now?

Crafting Communities of Care

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Teaching and Learning in Crisis (Kathryn Van Zanen)

In March 2020 COVID-19 reached American university campuses. Cancelations and closures abruptly moved courses online, opening difficult conversations about remote teaching in times of crisis. Cases and deaths rose, slowed, and rose again; campuses reopened and closed and sent students to "quarantine dorms." While everyone has been affected by COVID-19, the cost is not equally distributed: infections, deaths, and economic instability have been concentrated in congregate settings and lower-income communities, and among Black Americans in particular (Baker and Snyder 2020). In May 2020 Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd. Weeks of nationwide protests against police brutality, systemic racism, and anti-Black violence gave rise to campaigns for change at universities. Student activists challenged university administrations to rename buildings honoring confederate generals, enslavers, and segregationists, to cut police ties and police budgets, and to change policies and curricula. Institutional tensions intensified as the 2020–21 academic year began; on our own campus, the Graduate Employee Organization called a strike for expanded COVID-19 testing and a demilitarized campus. The University of Michigan responded with a lawsuit. Faced with budget cuts, unsafe workplaces, impossible administrative directives, our own fears and vulnerabilities, and a renewed urgency for anti-racist

work, I and my colleagues—along with other graduate students and educators across the country—are turning over the question: what does a good teacher do now?

In response to this extended moment of crisis, we lay out a vision for college teaching that centers on care for students, instructors, and staff. As graduate students, we occupy two and sometimes all three of these roles, depending on the semester; our position in the university is unique, precarious, and essential. We are educators who are also students and teachers of education, writers who are also students and teachers of writing. In this essay, we each share a vignette from our own experience that guided us toward our collective thesis. In response to the question, What does a good teacher do now? we have answered, A good teacher crafts communities of care. Care work is dynamic and multiple, produced and reproduced by its collaborators, but it shares common threads: care privileges people over institutions and values access and empathy over rigid constructions of rigor. As we rework our practices, pedagogies, and policies for a new season, we argue for a reckoning with our responsibility to promote the well-being of every member of the institutional community.

When I began teaching as a twenty-four-year-old master's student, I knew just enough about teaching to know that I was not very good at it. To quell my anxiety, I developed a ritual to remind myself of what I believed was most important. Before and sometimes after class, I would make a mental list of what I believe a good teacher does and ask myself if I was meeting those criteria:

- A good teacher cares about their students.
- A good teacher listens to students' questions and concerns.
- A good teacher communicates to students that they and their ideas are valued.
- A good teacher works continually to improve their practice.

On days when my lessons were disorganized or students seemed disengaged or when I bungled instructions, announcements, or activities, I would ask myself: Do I still care about my students? Do I listen to their concerns? Am I responding to their contributions in a way that shows that I value their ideas? Am I trying to do better? Yes.

In *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto*, historian and professor Kevin M. Gannon (2019: 22) writes that our pedagogy is "a declaration of what we think matters" and who we believe ourselves and our students to be. The "good teacher" checklist I developed as a novice instructor offers such a dec-

laration. It is not primarily about the content of the courses I teach, nor about measuring what students should know and be able to do at the end. It starts with caring about the people involved in the activity of learning: attending to my students' needs and positing reasonable goals for myself, their instructor. But the COVID-19 pandemic and this moment of recognition of white supremacy demand revisions of my list. Centering care in my work as a white educator demands attention to the systems and structures that demarcate that pursuit, how, and for whom. As Bettina Love (2019) argues, loving "all" students is not enough. My checklist is changing to reflect "good teaching" as a process and continual challenge:

- A good teacher cares about their students *and fights for justice for their students.*
- A good teacher listens to students' questions and concerns, *accepting feedback and pledging to do better.*
- A good teacher communicates to students that they and their ideas are valued *and continually educates themself about their students' backgrounds and experiences.*
- A good teacher works continually to improve their practice *and to improve the institutional and social circumstances that delimit that practice.*

We know that we have little individual agency in the face of the structural forces—institutionalized racism, ableism, austerity—that shape our personal and professional lives. No educator can optimize learning in less than optimal circumstances or build a fully equitable classroom in a deeply inequitable world. But bell hooks (1994: 14) asserts that the work of educators, and by extension the project of education, "is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students." If we, too, believe that the value of higher education lies not only in preparing students for the workforce but also in the development of informed citizens and engaged community members equipped to likewise contribute to communities of care—students who are ready and able to protest, organize, and vote in pursuit of justice—then acknowledging the humanity of our students and colleagues is not a distraction or a dilution of academic rigor. It is the real work.

In this moment of reckoning, we put forward four lenses—trauma, surveillance, accessibility, and labor—as essential sites for that work. As graduate student instructors committed to being and becoming good teachers, to caring for our students, our colleagues, and ourselves, we articulate this vision of good teaching as an act of resistance and a call for resistance to

all involved with the work of postsecondary education, including tenured, tenure-track, and contingent faculty; graduate students; and staff. We heed Love's instruction: care means pursuing justice and equity for our students and one another. We must surface and address racial inequities, exercising trauma-informed pedagogies that foster safety and community. We must attend to the consequences of surveilling our students through video technologies and data mining. We must proactively and reflexively enact accessibility in our classrooms. And we must call on institutions to provide educators with more flexibility, autonomy, support, and employment security. Being a good teacher, now, means working toward communities of care in all the ways available to us, and organizing to make a way where there is no way available.

Trauma and Teaching (Crystal Zanders)

I couldn't do it. We were supposed to watch *Sorry to Bother You* (dir. Riley, 2018), a movie that satirically critiques structural racism, and I couldn't watch it. Since the coronavirus hit, I had been reading the news; although viruses "don't see color," health care does. African Americans have been disproportionately affected; it is killing us at significantly higher rates (Bouie 2020; Einhorn 2020). In response there has been a slew of racially coded finger wagging, blaming "the choices made by Black people, or poverty, or obesity—but not racism" (Kendi 2020), as if it is our fault that we are dying. I am worried.

I should be concerned. My physical health (asthma and high blood pressure) and my mental health (major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder) are under attack at the same time. I worry about the elderly women in my family, about my family members with preexisting conditions. And I worry about myself. What if I get sick and doctors treat me like they treated Rana Zoe Mungin (Brito 2020)? They didn't believe her, and she died.

Probably most frustrating is that I am worried about being worried. The inpatient psychiatric facilities are also teeming with coronavirus (Dickson 2020). If I can't keep my shit together, I could literally die.

So, I didn't watch the movie. Mid-way through the discussion, with my video and audio off, I began sobbing. The next day, another Black graduate student told me she had turned the video off during a Zoom class to cry, too.

The world is experiencing a collective traumatic event. According to Bessel van der Kolk (2015: 588), "Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about but also our very capacity to think." How can you be expected to concentrate on classes when your ability to think has been physiologically reduced?

Trauma-informed pedagogy is a result of educators acknowledging that students don't check their trauma at the door. Borrowing from the fields of psychology, medicine, and social work, it adapts the principles of "trauma-informed care" to schools and universities where teachers focus on creating classrooms that are places of refuge for their students. How can we, as educators, focus on providing healing and support for our students who are going through a traumatic event, when our own brain capacity is limited and our emotional resources are stressed by our own experience of this traumatic event? How can we be there for our students when we can barely be there for ourselves?

One possible solution would be to create communities of care that encourage students to care for themselves and for each other. Disability justice advocate Leah Lakshimi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2019: 32–33) writes, "What does it mean to shift our ideas of access and care (whether it's disability, childcare, economic access, or many more) from an individual chore . . . to a collective responsibility that's maybe even joyful?" Instead of the "teacher gives, student receives" model, everyone gives and everyone receives. In constructing these communities, we acknowledge the reality that as teachers and as students, our emotional resources are finite.

Piepzna-Samarasinha (2019) continues, "What does it mean to wrestle with these ideas of softness and strength, vulnerability, pride, asking for help, and not—all of which are so deeply raced and classed and gendered?" (33). Creating a community of care isn't a magic pill for racism or trauma. However, I believe this is a way to do better, be better. We have an opportunity to provide the space for healing, to create the conditions under which we can move forward together in this time of displacement, disruption, disinformation, and disease.

I was on fellowship for the 2019–20 school year, but I am teaching as I write in Fall 2020. I designed my online class intentionally to create a community of care. My students are in groups where they comment on each other's journals each week and some weeks meet virtually to complete activities during class time without me. I ask students to check in with each other during that time. I can't force folks to care, but I can make it convenient and natural.

As a Black student at a predominately white institution, I would like to say that I would have felt supported had my instructors created a similar community, that I would have been better insulated against the sharp wind that blew in the coronavirus; the truth is more complex. Black people would still have been dying, triggering my depression and anxiety, regardless of what was going on in my classes.

However, when bad things happen, the default position of most educational institutions makes things worse. That's what happened. That's what is still happening. Having a classroom that didn't cause additional harm, that didn't add to my trauma would have been an immeasurable improvement. A community of care could have provided much-needed support, a space where I felt safe and seen rather than attacked and surveilled. This semester, I hope to do better for my students.

Surveillance and Remote Learning (Jathan Day)

Before COVID-19, I gave little thought to my home environment or the way that I appeared while inhabiting it. When our institution moved instruction online, my notions of school and home spaces collapsed, and I suspect the same was true for other students and instructors (see, for example, Flaherty 2020). I never considered how my home space—now my workspace—could be read by remote participants during a Zoom conference, nor did I obscure or justify things in this space the way that I do now. But as a white, male graduate student and writing instructor, I am read differently from my colleagues and students of color; when I turn off my camera and audio, I doubt that it raises questions about conduct and (in)visibility the way it does for a Black student when they turn off theirs. The pandemic and its spotlight on the continued violence in the United States against Black bodies implore us to rethink our teaching technologies as we cultivate communities of care in our remote classrooms.

Many instructors have come to depend on video conferencing as a means to simulate classroom engagement. However, we must be mindful that our paradigm is shifting and that video conferencing requires students to expend limited energy as they exist during these crises. Asking students to share themselves online creates untenable expectations that they can deftly separate their personal and "student" lives when they may lack the bandwidth to do so. Equally troubling are moments of "Zoombombing" (Lorenz 2020) and racist Zoombombing (Redden 2020) whereby interlopers share inappropriate content during a remote session, which potentially creates further trauma. Students have very few options for obfuscating themselves save turning off the camera entirely. And as Sarah's section suggests, synchronous online teaching can create access barriers for students, which can apply layers of further discomfort over issues of surveillance.

Synchronous technologies are not neutral, nor are they necessarily safe or welcoming for students of color who are subjected to daily and pervasive surveillance. Black students in particular may be struggling with the

psychological effects of surveillance (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007), which is entrenched in histories of slavery and marking of Black bodies (Browne 2015). Requiring synchronous online sessions potentially exposes students of color and other marginalized identities to racializing and surveillance by not only their white peers and instructors but also by third parties with which technologies cooperate. For example, Zoom potentially endangers Black and undocumented students by cooperating with the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (*Bloomberg* 2020). And even if safety is foremost in our technology use, our communities of care must also confront the ways participation and engagement are surveilled via video conferencing—specifically, that visibility equates to attendance or that students should conduct themselves "professionally"—which has classist underpinnings and places emphasis on white behaviors and ways of thinking (Griffin and Reddick 2011).

Equally important to acknowledge is the dependence that we have on accountability technologies that supplement our classrooms, many of which make up larger, potentially more nefarious forms of surveillance. For example, some test-proctoring technologies employ algorithms that track students' appearances, body movements, and behaviors; these algorithms may misflag not only disabled students for not conforming to "able-bodied" standards but also students of color whose faces are less detectable than their white peers' (Swauger 2020). Also, plagiarism software such as Turnitin builds its database on the labor of students (Morris and Stommel 2017); when students submit their essays for plagiarism checks, they are essentially giving up ownership of their essays. Our communities of care must therefore include discussions with our students about how these technologies can mine and repurpose their data—a function that can have implications for decisions related to education funding and the other kinds of technology that their institutions come to sponsor down the road.

What the COVID-19 pandemic teaches us is that surveillance will only increase. We are experiencing a massive recalibration of surveillance that will only be more focused and intensified as we continue using these technologies during the pandemic. It is our duty as instructors to work with our student communities to prepare for and resist the strengthened mechanisms of surveillance that will linger long after the pandemic. This means allowing our students to decide what parts of themselves to share with their peers, with us, and with various companies and platforms. This also involves giving students a voice in the choices we make for technologies we use in our classrooms. Developing this habit of mind now, when there is so much for

larger institutional, proprietary, and carceral entities to capitalize on, shows our students we care about their safety and well-being during and after the pandemic.

Accessibility and the Digital Realm (Sarah Hughes)

I remember the feeling, like holding my breath, waiting for the announcement that felt inevitable. Then, when the email announcing our university's swift turn to online learning finally came, with just two days to shift already complete curricula to an online ecosystem, all I could think about were the logistics. As a graduate student taking coursework and an instructor teaching, I wondered: Would we continue to have synchronous discussions? How could I maintain a sense of calm for my students and myself, when every email I received called these times "unprecedented" or "uncertain" or "difficult"?

As instructors grappling with this disorienting transition, we were guided by an online resource from our university on access to remote instruction, which included best practices, links to resources, and even an email address for questions about accessibility of specific software. It was a helpful starting point for instructors in the midst of an exhausting transition. Still, no single resource could account for the complexity of support we hope to offer disabled students navigating an unjust education system or the ways disability intersects with race to literally endanger the lives of disabled Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). Disabled students carry the stigmas of their bodyminds, the expectation that they perform neutrality to meet ableist expectations of what constitutes competence. Students may be reticent then to share what they need, especially in asking their own professors to revise their classroom practices and policies. After all, disclosing to one's professor is always fraught, and the pandemic has only made these requests more fraught, shifting both what students need and how universities can respond to them. Caring, then, might involve instructors making moves to welcome such requests, emphasizing our openness to creating living classrooms that shift and change, depending on the needs our students share with us, as we work preemptively to meet those needs through course design.

This online resource from our university may not have had the potential to create, by itself, accessible online classrooms. I don't think it was ever intended to. It could, however, inspire intentionality: the mindful, persistent care for students in our classes, even when we've only met them virtually and the only space we've shared together is online. It urged us to meditate on our work, to consider how our programs and practices have consequences for disabled students. It called attention to them, made them legible in a system that

so often ignores them, by inviting us to reach out, to ask for help if we were uncertain about how our course tools might be gatekeeping full participation for every student in our class.

The resource, in other words, urged us to resist the compulsion to see our classrooms as neutral spaces. Ai Binh T. Ho and colleagues (2020) offer a critique of the performance of neutrality among disabled teachers, yet their point resonates also for nondisabled instructors teaching disabled students—and it should be noted that this is likely all instructors, whether we're cognizant of it or not. They write, "More than just being impossible, neutrality, when associated with notions of objectivity, reproduces violent and ableist results in the classroom, especially for visibly marginalized instructors and students" (137). Rather than understanding our classroom spaces as neutral, we must acknowledge, in visible and invisible ways, how they are discriminatory, and we as good teachers must push back against this discrimination through conscientious, intentional, visible care for our students. We must ask: What assumptions am I making about modality, device compatibility, cognitive load and attention, and eye contact? In what ways are my class discussions and activities failing to be accessible for my students? In what ways are they discriminatory?

We must be proactive in designing our courses with space to adapt to students' requests, making our reflections on these choices legible. We should share with students why we accept work past deadlines, why we ensure all files are screen reader-friendly, or why we choose a virtual classroom application that automatically transcribes our voices, so they know that we are thinking about them and genuinely working toward meeting their needs. We must tell them that if some dimension of our class, an assignment or a platform, is inaccessible to them, we want to engage in communal action to make change. We do not want to leave them to solve these problems alone. When approaching access through this lens of care for students individually and systemically, instructors can continue to adapt our classrooms, semester to semester, moment to moment, and students will be more likely to voice their specific needs to us and beyond us. But this work toward accessibility can happen only in stages, over time, reflexively, through care.

The events of this year have illuminated the importance of working toward, not just anticipating, trust with students. If we hope our students will be willing to share their needs with us, to share with us how we can make our classes more accessible for them, we need to be willing to be vulnerable ourselves, to regularly communicate our openness, in words and deeds, to receiving their needs and adapting our classroom policies, procedures, and

actions in return. This is essential in the midst of a pandemic, when so many of us find ourselves teaching online or hybrid classes and relying on technologies we may have never used before, but it will remain important when the chaos of the pandemic has subsided, when we return to our classrooms, and when we are still teaching disabled students, whether we know it or not.

Labor Conditions for Instructors (Andrew Moos)

It is no surprise that in this pandemic instructors have found themselves overwhelmed by hours of additional—often invisible—labor. When classes transitioned online in March of 2020, I and many fellow graduate student instructors, in virtual meetings and emails, shared the labor concerns we were hoping to see our administration and departments address. However, when instead of coming together as a community of care, powerful individuals worked to exclude the concerns of graduate students, patronize those who expressed misgivings at the university's handling of events, and gas-light the community, we as a graduate student union went on strike.

In voting to strike for improved labor and safety conditions for all on campus, the union wanted to see the university live up to the moral exigencies of the moment. Among many things, we wanted to see the institution's woefully limited and opaque testing plan improved. We wanted to see the institution make efforts to disarm and divest from a variety of policing agencies—some of which the institution had planned to use to enforce mask mandates on undergraduates. We wanted assurances that we would not be required to teach in-person courses against our wishes. We wanted to stand for what a "good" teacher would stand for: protections for students and colleagues.

We didn't get any of that. Instead, in concluding the strike after a week and a half because the university threatened to sue the union out of existence and seek legal action against certain members, we got demeaning and halfhearted promises of future meetings that would "investigate" our concerns. As we returned to work in our various departments—many of which had not been supportive of the strike—it was hard to find hope. Where previously I felt pride in being an instructor, student, and a researcher at my institution, I now felt ashamed. And I suspect that I am not the only graduate student within this institution or outside it that is now rethinking their future within academia.

The consequences of "these times of uncertainty"—as they have come to be referred to in just about every email, conversation, and commercial taking place nowadays—are and have always been more immediate for some

instructors. As Gary Hall (2016: 16) writes, precariously employed individuals in higher education provide low-paid services on demand, and they therefore "take the risks associated with having lost their rights, benefits, and protection as employees in this 'gig economy.'" Whether it is an uncertainty of funding or an uncertainty of employment that instructors face, uncertainty—sometimes framed more optimistically as "hope"—is a core tool of higher education used to exploit instructors for their labor. Going into this past semester, institutions leaned heavily into a rhetoric of hope and unity, all the while pitting students, instructors, staff, and faculty against one another, shifting blame and responsibility on to everyone but those at the top.

These institutional forces twist and resist embracing what a community of care should be: a space to be acknowledged as human. Before we can create spaces in which instructors and students can collectively respect one another's humanity, we need to critically reckon with how normalized unjust labor practices are in higher education. For example, while the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC and CWPA 2020) joint statement on COVID-19 encourages departments to provide their instructors with "strategies for managing the workload . . . [and to set] firm limits for online availability beyond what is reasonable," the statement falls short in addressing what "reasonable" even means in the context of a pandemic. And, when reasonableness is left up to institutions to decide, abuse and burnout will occur.

In this era of COVID-19 and the public reconsideration of what higher education might look like moving forward, it is essential to understand that the multimillion- or multibillion-dollar corporations instructors work for will not properly value labor or the human beings doing said labor. We need further collective efforts that address the gaps left by rules, policies, and "reasonable" labor norms that were created for a time that seems in many ways incompatible with our current situation and the world that may soon emerge from it. Long after COVID-19 is hopefully a distant speck in our collective rearview mirror, the hiring freezes, layoffs, shuttering of departments, withdrawal of funding for graduate students, and pay cuts instituted now are not likely to be reversed. In the face of this ongoing pandemic, instructors must reconsider how this unique experience reframes our understanding of labor conditions, professional boundaries, and what is essential to education, and we as instructors must do this work together by prioritizing communities of care.

Conclusion

The present global crises are an urgent invitation to listen to each other—to listen especially to BIPOC, disabled, contingently employed, and otherwise precariously positioned voices. We and our students may not live the same traumas as we navigate a world contorted by the pandemic, but our freedoms are bound up together. We who strive to be "good teachers" must harness this moment to make the educational practices and policies more equitable and supportive. Where a way toward communities of care is available, we take it. Where there is no way, we organize to make one. This pandemic, in reconfiguring our routines, in challenging our notions of good teaching, in rattling our students' college experiences, opens space for us to reevaluate our understanding of higher education and the work that guides it.

We call for instructors to reevaluate their policies for flexibility, accessibility, and privacy; foster safety and community in their classrooms; advocate for colleagues with less security and privilege; and pursue collective action. We call for institutions to support pedagogical revision, safeguard the right to privacy, and take action to support contingent faculty and students, especially in the face of increasingly invasive forms of technological surveillance and untenable labor conditions. But we know the space available for instructors to realize this vision is demarcated by larger systems and forces, such as financial insecurity because of inconsistent contracts, budget cuts, low wages, and other challenges faced during these crises.

So, what does it mean to be a good teacher during a global pandemic? This essay echoes and affirms the many teaching voices who are responding to this moment by encouraging care for our students and for ourselves. A good teacher understands that in the presence of other teachers—teachers unified under a commitment to justice for themselves, their colleagues, and their students—in communities of care there exists hope, and it is within that hope that we find the opportunity for action.

Note

All authors contributed equally to the manuscript and are sharing first authorship.

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