

## Post-Pandemic Teaching: Balancing Motivation, Empathy and Rigor

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**Abstract:** Teaching during the pandemic presented its own unique set of challenges for faculty. As we return to a more normal high educational environment, there are changes that still need to be made to adjust to post-pandemic teaching. This paper discusses three key aspects of teaching that need more consideration following the pandemic: motivation, rigor and empathy. Each one is discussed and strategies for applying them are described. Teaching in a post-pandemic world will require changes, just as adjusting to the pandemic did. Higher educational institutions need to ensure they are prepared for these changes and are not reverting to “life as normal,” as our students are no longer in the same place they were pre-pandemic.

**Key words:** pandemic teaching, post-pandemic teaching, empathy, motivation, rigor, teaching opportunities

**JEL codes:** I2

### 1. Introduction

Teaching during a pandemic presented numerous challenges for faculty. Many universities switched to remote operations for some period of time requiring faculty to create or modify courses for online learning. Even when in person courses began again, the classroom environment was significantly altered by the world around us. Researchers have found that the pandemic led to an increase in depression and anxiety for college students (Wang, Hegde, Son, Keller, Smith, Sasangohar, 2020). It also increased barriers and created additional hardships for students of color and low income students (Lederer, Hoban, Lipsin, Zhou, Eisenberg, 2020) with Black, Latinx and Asian students reporting worries over financial difficulties and lower expectations of completing their schooling compared to White students (Reyes Portillo et al., 2022). These difficulties impacted not only the classroom experience but also the post-graduation outlook for students. Not only were students struggling to complete school work and get to graduation, but now getting work experience, internships, and having the confidence to search for jobs were all significantly hindered as well. Though we may be learning to live with the pandemic, the way we handled these challenges may be useful and necessary in order to continue to help students to succeed moving forward.

The three main areas of focus for this paper are motivation, rigor and empathy. Each plays an important role in teaching and must be balanced in order to provide a challenging, compassionate and impactful learning environment. This was even more true during the pandemic. How we handle each one greatly impacts our effectiveness, as well as student engagement, confidence and understanding.

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## 2. Motivation

Motivating students can sometimes feel like herding cats. Especially for any faculty member who has taught a fully online course, a 3 (or more) hour lecture course or an 8am class, it can be challenging to keep students engaged. Choosing topics that students can relate to and understand is important. Delivering content in an easily digestible way is even more so. While much of what we teach can be complex and often brand new to students, one of the key ways to help students understand is through application. Whether it be through assignments, projects, or discussion, actually having to understand how a concept is used can provide clarity to a subject that students may find confusing. During the pandemic it may have seemed even harder for students to grasp this type of material. However, the pandemic also presented the opportunity to take advantage of online resources. Using simulations or videos, students could still be engaged, even in fully remote courses. Also, allowing for real world projects or applications can help students to gain skills for their future and increase their interest in the course. This may have been difficult online however, project based learning requires flexibility and with the addition of zoom or any video platform, students can have group meetings, meet with an organization or have class and still manage to learn through doing. These online changes can still be helpful even if courses are in person.

During the pandemic, student motivation was significantly lower. Returning to a more normal environment has still not led to a more motivated student body. With many students out with covid or worried about money or their family, or attempting to regain their life, students have not mentally been able to focus on their schooling as much as they could prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic, reaching out to students to “check in” and to encourage them to stay motivated became more necessary. Whether it be sending weekly emails to students in classes to remind them about their work, encourage their effort and let them know you are there, or checking on advisees to keep them motivated as the semester progresses, it’s important to make sure students are okay. This can be as simple as reminding students of campus resources such as tutoring, academic coaching, counseling, and career services. While many faculty put these things in their syllabus, reminders throughout the semester can help students so they don’t forget and also don’t think they have to go without help. While these check-ins and reminders were helpful during the pandemic, they really can be helpful all the time, and are fairly simple as they can usually be done in an email or post on a class site.

## 3. Empathy

Empathy became essential during the pandemic. Students were not only getting covid, but they were working more, dealing with sick family members, feeling isolated and anxious and generally overwhelmed (as many of us were). Many faculty struggled to balance course deadlines and work expectations with student absences, illness and lack of motivation. It is imperative for faculty to decide what deadlines and assignments are immovable and where flexibility can be offered. Late work doesn’t ever need to be consequence free necessarily, but if a student is willing to complete an assignment and learn more about a concept, we should always think twice about why we want to halt that process. My goal is for a student to learn. If they want to do that on their own timeline in a way that doesn’t impact other students (or my time), and earn a lower grade for it, that is their choice. There will always be work and assignments that cannot be moved or done late but there are things that are out of a student’s control and offering flexibility can be helpful to reduce anxiety for students. Many students have gotten covid during the 2021-2022 school year that interfered with important presentations, projects and exams. Creating a

policy ahead of time is important so students know what to expect. Faculty can also build time into the course where students may need additional time to complete work or revise things where applicable. This provides a cushion for everyone without holding anything up. Creativity on the faculty members part is important. Can a student send a video of themselves giving their final presentation if they are quarantining? Can an exam be taken early if a student knows they have a conflict (they would get less time to study than other students in this case)? Can homework assignments or quizzes be virtual giving all students access no matter where they are? Being able to provide flexibility when appropriate can make a big difference for students who really are trying and just need some understanding to continue to succeed.

#### **4. Rigor**

At this point many faculty members would say that students are no longer able to meet high standards and giving students flexibility can lead to a lack of rigor. First, you should understand what rigor means in your courses. Rigor can mean difficult concepts, or challenging work. It can also mean work with impactful outcomes like service learning or real-world projects. Rigor does not necessarily mean burying students in work or having immovable deadlines. It is important to evaluate our assignments, projects and course activities every semester, and even keep a running list of changes to be made during the semester when you see what things are working and what things are not. Things that are not helping students learn, that seem superfluous, or are just designed to keep students busy should be removed. All course materials should help students learn at a minimum, but allowing students to apply concepts, practice skills, utilize new knowledge or use their creativity can be even more rigorous as well as motivating.

Another example of rigor can be through course reading. Many faculty use a book to assist student learning. It is important to choose a book wisely and all faculty should read their textbook completely at least once. You may realize it's wonderful, with great tools for students. You may also realize its tedious with outdated examples and incredibly time consuming. Students should learn to read critically, and it is important our reading materials allow them to do this. However there is a balance between a challenging read and a book they will not open or buy. Encouraging students by telling them what benefits the book offers and why they are reading it is important but ensuring the book is a good fit is too. This is also an area where virtual components that were added during the pandemic can be helpful. Online modules that come with books may help with concept application. Using articles and videos to support the reading can also provide students with a well-rounded view of the material. In addition to textbooks, consider shorter books as well that explain theory in an applied way for students, or even books that have an audio component.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Overall the pandemic has put increased emphasis on how faculty balance motivation, empathy and rigor in their courses. While the beginning of the pandemic may have required a lot of empathy, and motivation may have been lacking for everyone, hopefully we can use what we learned moving forward to still provide a rigorous learning experience, while also keeping students motivated, and being empathetic to their lives and the world around us.

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