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ADVICE

A Year of Remote Teaching: the Good, the Bad, and the Next Steps

How can academe make best use of the faculty's vast new capacity to teach with technology?

By *Michelle D. Miller*

MARCH 17, 2021



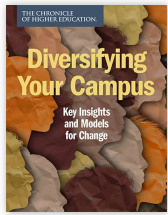
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A year ago this month, the realization began to settle in: All the workarounds we'd devised to continue teaching during the looming pandemic weren't going to be a short-term thing.

Looking back, it's clear that pandemic teaching has pushed academics to the edge of possibility, and shown just what we can do with the tech we have and the willingness to experiment. It's also created a massive new reserve of faculty knowledge about how to use technology tools. We're never going back to a time when large swaths of the faculty lacked basic knowledge about things like learning-management systems and videoconferencing, or when the ability to teach in a virtual classroom was rare.

Post-pandemic, that newfound capacity is something that academe can either waste or put to good use. I'm hoping for the latter.

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Last March, as a veteran of online teaching and educational technology, I offered advice to instructors on “[Going Online In a Hurry](#).” By fall 2020, institutions had rolled out their own versions of [HyFlex](#) and other teaching models featuring some mix of in-person and online instruction. At Northern Arizona University, where I teach psychology, I’ve been using its “[NAUFlex](#)” system for most of 2020-21. What follows are my thoughts on the surprises — good and bad — of this unprecedented academic year, and on what’s coming next.

Pleasant Surprises

In 2019, I wrote a guide for *The Chronicle* on [teaching with technology](#), so clearly I am an ed-tech fan. But I had my doubts about the workability of flex-teaching systems in the typical undergraduate classroom. HyFlex means students can choose how to attend class. The instructor must simultaneously teach in a physical and a virtual classroom, and also create an asynchronous online version. It’s a lot for a faculty member to manage — even if, like me, you are already familiar with the technology. Not all of my worries about that, however, have come to pass.

Dealing with the chat window during class wasn’t a disaster. I found that I could monitor the ongoing stream of comments and questions from remote students reasonably well. And as it turned out, they often used the chat to drop in personal notes and observations related to the course material. When we were discussing Pavlovian conditioning in my “Introduction to Psychology” course, students chimed in with observations like, “that’s what my dog does all the time!” and, “I got stung by a bunch of wasps too when I was a kid — still afraid of them.” Those comments

wouldn't have been shared otherwise — at least, not with me — but they added a new, engaging dimension to class.

Attendance has been good. Or at least, it has been if you count participation across all the different options offered. My university emphasizes synchronous remote instruction, via Zoom or Blackboard Learn, with an option to attend class in person. We're finding that most students are choosing to attend class remotely, which means that I'm not ending up in the oversold-seats situation that I feared. I maintain a simple signup sheet so I know how many students I can expect in person each class, and so far, there's physically been plenty of space to accommodate everyone who wants to be there.

Recordings of class meetings haven't created a privacy nightmare. Fortunately, we've had very few cases of class recordings being shared in ways that could lead to online harassment or similar problems. That was no small concern for faculty members in disciplines like mine (psychology) that deal with sensitive subjects all the time.

Quarantines and sick leave have been manageable. I've had to stay off campus many times after being flagged by our health-monitoring system for potential exposure to Covid. A lot of my students have, too. Some have needed significant recovery time after being ill. Although it's been stressful for all concerned, I've found that, with flexibility and videoconferencing, my students and I have been able to keep moving forward.

Unexpected — and Expected — Problems

Of course, not all of the surprises I've experienced in this difficult year have been pleasant. And not all of the unpleasant aspects of flex-teaching came as a surprise.

Cognitive overload on the instructor. The mega-multitasking required to pull off even the simplest flex-style class is a serious limitation, one that many professors predicted

and that continues to cause much of [the stress associated with this mode of teaching](#). Don't get me wrong — practicing helps, and you can do a surprising amount of effective juggling once you have mastered the basic tools. But as most cognitive psychologists would agree, practice has its limits. No amount of preparation will help you respond to unexpected questions or problems. It's tough on the teacher, and frequently tedious for the students, as we frantically toggle and juggle our way through every class.

It's hard to truly integrate remote and in-person students. During class, you can't effectively devote attention to both groups at the same time. I find that I can either be actively engaged with the remote group, while the in-person students watch, or vice versa — but I can't do both at once. I try to split the difference by alternating who I'm “really” talking with at any given point in class, but that's the best I can do. Tiny things that an instructor never had to worry about before — like where to look during a class discussion — have now become another set of decisions to make.

Flex-teaching is hard on the technology, too. The simple and unglamorous fact is that HyFlex requires powerful, reliable, up-to-date technology — something that you cannot assume is going to be available (and working) in every classroom or lab. Internet crashes and equipment failures are a hiccup in an in-person class, but they're a game-ender in a HyFlex class with remote students. It's not just a matter of having a working webcam, either. Many of the things that help make a remote classroom engaging — running quiz games, showing streamed videos, working in shared documents — can crash a system that is not reasonably powerful and well maintained. It's not easy, cheap, or particularly exciting, but any institution that wants to provide remote flexible teaching in any form needs to keep its tech infrastructure in tip-top shape.

Those are some of the serious logistical challenges, but instructors also face other, far more consequential issues, too, that are even more complicated to resolve. Among them:

A rise in equity and access issues. Pandemic teaching exposed major, system-blinking-red inequities, many along racial and economic lines. For example, my university serves students from the nearby Navajo Nation, where the devastation from Covid-19 has been nothing short of [catastrophic](#). It follows that our Navajo students are even more likely than most to be coping with the illness and death of family members, and to be carrying a heavy caregiving load. Indigenous students are especially likely to lack internet access at home, necessitating time-consuming travel to a chapter house or other community center in order to participate in remote class or even just turn in assignments.

Couple all of that with the pandemic curfews that have been in place on and off all year, and you can see just how onerous the burden is — especially when course deadlines are inflexible and set mainly at night.

A loss of privacy and civility. Whether students should have to keep their cameras on during class remains a hot-button issue. Yes, it is unnerving to teach to a seemingly endless void of unresponsive black boxes, and this has led some faculty members to encourage, or even require students to be on camera at all times. Other instructors avoid such requirements because being on camera not only eats up bandwidth, it [accentuates inequalities and ignores well-founded discomfort](#) that some students have about displaying their faces and surroundings online. For my part, I heartily agree with critics who say that camera-on policies are intrusive, inconsiderate, and not in the least bit inclusive.

During the pandemic, many faculty members also have become keenly aware of the [disinhibition](#) phenomenon — the tendency to communicate things online that you wouldn't dream of saying to someone in person. Much like how people behave more rudely while speeding past one another in cars, students will be less kind in a chat stream, even when they know they're not anonymous. Likewise, they are prone to self-disclosure, to the point of rampant oversharing.

That places yet another side task on the instructor — monitoring civility and protecting privacy, sometimes in real time as class unfolds. As I noted earlier, some students' unguarded and uncensored comments are relevant to what we're discussing and amusing. But the remote environment emboldens other students to make biased or bullying comments. Even seemingly minor requests — such as when I asked students to choose pseudonyms for our in-class quiz games — proved problematic when some picked nicknames that were provocative or outright offensive. This became yet another thing I had to supervise and manage as the semester went along.

Lost ground in the fight for active learning. For all of the innovation that has emerged from our year of flex-teaching, we've also seen some backsliding toward an outdated, passive-consumption model of college teaching. Pre-Covid, many educators fought long and hard to get their fellow faculty members and administrators to recognize that the most important aspect of college teaching is active interaction with students — not content presentation (the professor talks, the students listen).

However, in the push to salvage the essential components of teaching during the big pivot, I often heard a subtle undercurrent of “the content is the learning.” I remember cringing, for example, when I heard an offhand comment praising flex-teaching because it would allow students to “consume education from anywhere.” The underlying assumption there: Faculty members will lecture, students will watch, problem solved. Active learning gets lost in that oversimplified view.

I've worked hard to ensure that my students don't absorb the idea that remote instruction means checking in online then checking out mentally, or that viewing a recording of class is equivalent to full participation. All of these options are great as backup plans and helpful enhancements, but let's keep reminding everyone — administrators, tech providers, academics, and students — that teaching is not content generation, and consuming content is not learning.

What's Next?

Lots of us are talking about the aspects of HyFlex teaching that we want to keep in place post-pandemic. I'll definitely hang onto the following technology fixes and features, in one form or another:

- Recording [class for students](#) is a big one.
- Low-stakes quizzes — set up so that remote synchronous, asynchronous, and in-person groups can all participate — have been a big hit in my classes, so I'll be keeping those in place. (I use [Kahoot!](#), but there are lots of other good tools for polling and live quizzing.)
- I've enjoyed experimenting with the chat function to promote class discussion.
- Google Docs have proven to be a great way to organize and record the outcomes of breakout-group discussions.
- Through [online collaborative annotation](#), students are having more of the thoughtful, peer-to-peer conversations about course readings that I've always wanted.
- Mindful of the extraordinary financial pressures on students right now, I finally made the leap to using a free online [OpenStax](#) textbook.

But I'll also be keeping a new mind-set — refined over the past year — that questions the value of hard-line, penalty-driven course policies [in favor of flexible ones](#) that encourage more two-way communication between professor and student. I've argued [in these pages](#) that a renewed focus on students and their goals could be one of the best takeaways of pandemic teaching. Meeting students where they are, finding out what they need, and accepting assignments on any reasonable timeline that works should be particularly helpful to struggling students, especially those for whom systemic racism and economic inequity get in the way of education.

At the same time, we need to consider a related inequity — the ability of diverse faculty members to enact such changes without endangering their careers. As a tenured white professor, I might get a little pushback — or even some praise — for adopting unusual practices like flexible deadlines or more student choice in

assignments. But Bipoc faculty members might find themselves accused of inconsistency or insufficient rigor. Tenure means I could weather any fallout from radically departing from traditional practices, but untenured faculty members might find themselves punished, or without a job.

New approaches mean risk, after all, and we should all know by now that risk is not equally borne. So as we move forward post-pandemic, we have to make sure that all faculty members can access and adopt these teaching innovations and be judged fairly on their outcomes.

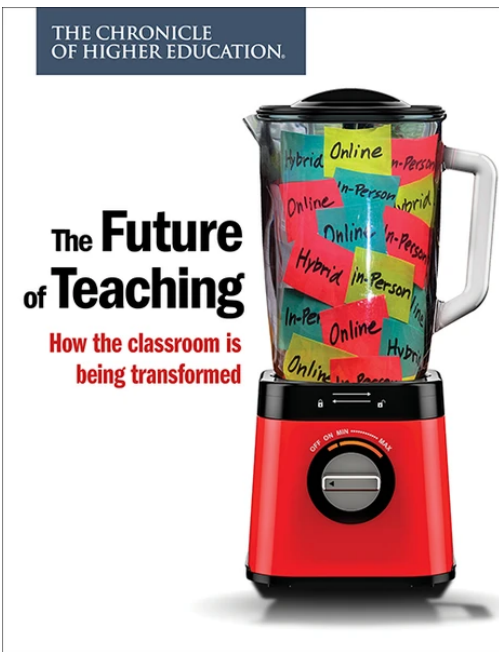
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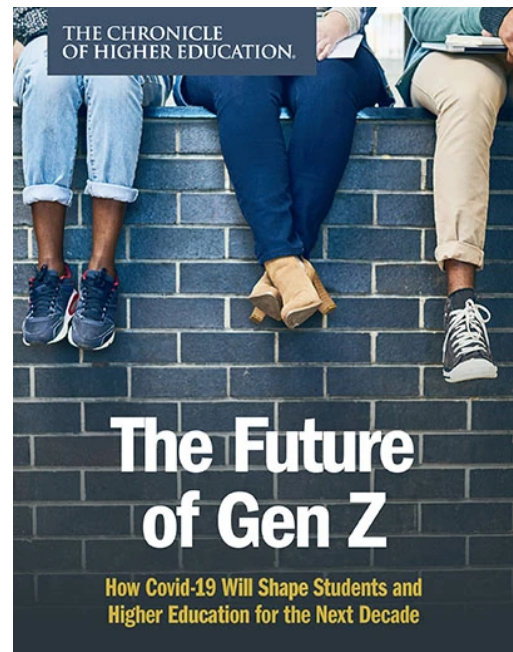
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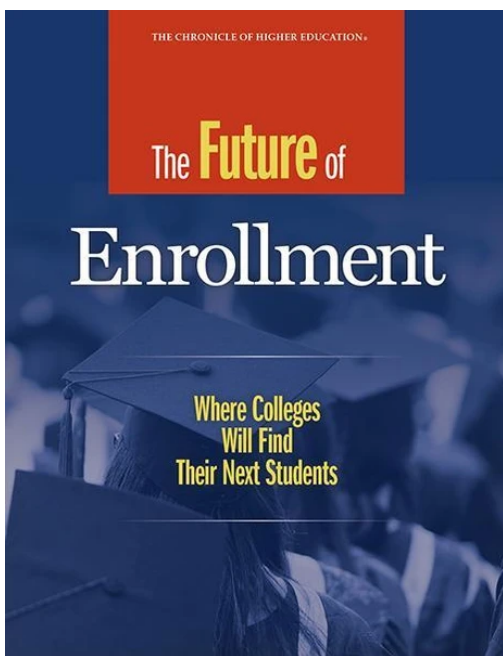
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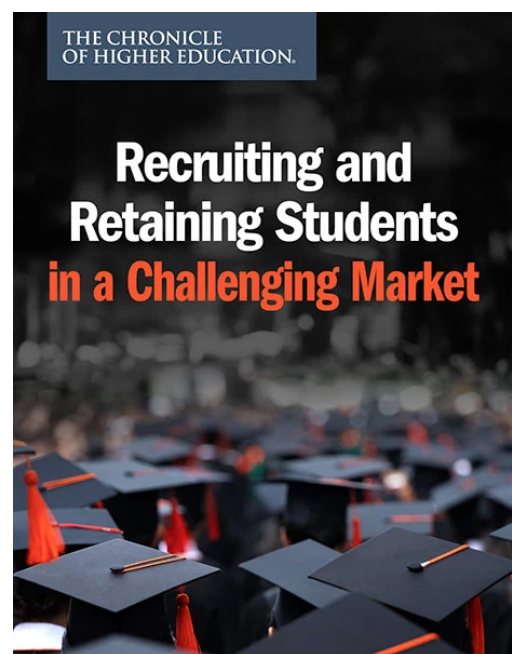
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