

“COVID keepers”: The teaching strategies we should hold onto after the pandemic ends

*Letitia Basford
Professor, Teacher Education
Hamline University
St. Paul, Minnesota
lbasford01@hamline.edu*

Last spring, our small liberal arts school was forced into an all-remote classroom context due to the pandemic. The shift was immediate and the teaching was admittedly messy. In the fall of 2020, we returned to a mix of remote and hybrid contexts, with a summer of pedagogical preparation under our belts. Across the university, faculty were trying new teaching strategies to enhance student learning under these new contexts. Faculty were also aware of the emotional toll that the pandemic placed on their students and practiced a more flexible and compassionate approach as a result. This coming fall, “Zooming-in,” masks, and sitting six feet apart may no longer be required, but faculty wondered if there might be some pandemic-focused teaching practices to hold onto moving forward. To address this question, we reached out to students to tell us what “COVID keepers” we should hold onto even long after the pandemic is over.

To capture student perspective, I draw from two sources of data:

1. A survey was given to all of our students at the end of March 2021 including both quantitative survey questions and open-ended comment boxes. The purpose of the survey was to gauge student satisfaction with their academic and campus experiences throughout the 2020-21 academic year. Roughly 10% of students completed the survey, with 193 (out of 1,925) undergraduate responses and 132 (out of 1,316) graduate student responses.
2. Two focus group interviews I conducted with my undergraduate (n = 15) and graduate (n = 18) Education classes during the spring of 2021. I asked students to reflect generally about the teaching practices across our campus that made a difference to them throughout this past academic year.

From this data, five themes surfaced. Below I describe these themes as “COVID keepers” that students want us to hold on to.

“COVID keeper” #1: Practice flexibility and compassion

Survey data revealed that students were aware that many professors had been significantly more

flexible and compassionate as a result of the pandemic. Students reported that many professors provided additional support on assignments, extensions on due dates, recorded lectures for additional review, etc. Students expressed gratitude for this academic support.

In a focus group interview, one student shared how her professor frequently checked in with their class to get a pulse on how they were doing in his class. As the semester came to a close, several students in the class shared that they were feeling overwhelmed about the nature of his final exam. This professor listened and made the decision--for the first time in his teaching career-- to adjust his final multiple-choice, high-stakes exam to a final reflection paper with less weight. The student shared that the class felt immense gratitude to their professor for his flexibility and understanding and for his willingness to check in and ask for their perspectives.

This story aligns with a [recent article](#) about an instructor who made an important mindset shift during the pandemic: The instructor decided that they would say “yes” to any reasonable request for the year-- a significant shift for this instructor, as her typical answer had always been “no.” When the students wanted an additional review session, she said yes; if they wanted an extension on an assignment, she said yes; when they asked to use their notes on a test, she agreed. The outcome of all of this “yes” was surprising. She found that it strengthened her relationships with students and encouraged them to work harder and ask for help when they needed it. In summary, when we increased our flexibility and compassion during COVID, our students felt supported. Faculty stand to benefit from this practice as well.

“COVID keeper” #2: Your reaching out to us means a lot

This was a tough year, with the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, civil unrest, anti-Asian American discrimination, and more. Many of our students faced additional personal issues that put significant strain on them, such as job loss and sickness. Students shared that they are not always comfortable letting their professors know what is occurring for them personally, but that it meant a great deal when a professor took the time to do so.

For example, one student shared that he had a brother who was struggling with drug addiction and a mother recovering from cancer, creating significant issues within his family and taking a major toll on him. One of his professors noticed how withdrawn he was in class and reached out to him via email asking, “Are you doing alright? Want to go for a walk?” This gesture mattered immensely to him and helped him to charge on with the class. The takeaway here is that *our* reaching out to our

students means a lot. Even if we do not have the tools to fix the issue, we are showing students that we care. We increased this practice of reaching out during COVID and students want us to continue to do this moving forward.

“COVID keeper” #3: Practice vulnerability

Teaching in a remote context was new territory for many faculty. As a result, faculty were more likely to check in with students about how their instruction was going for them. We asked our students questions like, “Do I have these breakout rooms right? Should I continue doing ____?” Students appreciated this vulnerability and effort to seek out their suggestions for how to improve instruction.

In a focus group interview, one student described a professor who conducted an anonymous Google survey just two weeks into the semester to get a pulse on what was working or not for them. This student requested more time for discussion and was shocked when the professor acknowledged the request in front of the class and implemented the student’s recommendation right away. The student reflected, “When you see your suggestions implemented, it feels pretty awesome... like your voice matters.” Other focus group participants also appreciated the increased opportunity to offer early and more frequent feedback. They shared that end-of-the-semester course evaluations are typically the only opportunity to provide feedback which is too late to implement any meaningful change for their class experience. Faculty should continue to seek out suggestions from our students early in our semester in an effort to make our instruction meet their needs.

“COVID keeper” #4: Help us make sense of what is going on in the world

The last 12 months have been unrelenting. A little over a year ago, the in-person academic year was abruptly canceled. A few months later, George Floyd was killed, setting off months of some of the largest protests in U.S. history. This was followed by the assault on the capital, the killing of Daunte Wright, heightened anti-Asian American discrimination, and the list goes on. Students have been isolated, worried, and troubled. Some professors may feel a bit unsteady addressing these topics, or it may be difficult to directly tie our curriculum with the events going on outside our classroom, but holding space for regular “community meetings” can make a big difference.

For example, one focus group student talked about a professor’s routine of starting each class with a short five-ten minute “opening meeting” that allowed students to make announcements but also bring up the major news of the world. As the semester progressed, so did their courage to bring up things like a police shooting or the impending verdict of the Derek Chauvin trial. A student shared,

“That opening meeting became more and more powerful as we grew to know and trust one another. I learned that we were all going through a lot and were in good community together.” Another student shared a powerful experience with an instructor who began each class with a dedication, allowing a different student to lead it each time. These examples show small ways that we can offer our students an opportunity to make sense of the world and share their lives and perspectives, and they require little preparation or interruption to our courses as we normally teach them.

“COVID keeper” #5: Help us feel more connected

The survey revealed that the overwhelming majority of students felt dangerously isolated from their peers and from the university community at large due to how many of their classes were online. That said, focus group students shared a couple of powerful ways that some of their professors had helped them to feel connected, even in remote environments. One transfer student, new to our university, shared, “I expected to feel lost and overlooked in a new school, knowing nobody, during the pandemic. But one professor I had went to extensive effort to help us feel like every student mattered, even online.” This professor started each class with ice-breaker questions that forced students to talk, laugh, and get to know each other. She conferenced individually with students via Zoom and implemented partner discussion and group work that got students working together.

Research highlights that connection has a powerful effect on academic success. K-12 studies show that simple gestures like [greeting kids at the door](#) improve academic engagement by twenty percentage points. Small efforts to build connections in our classes matter a great deal to students and is a practice students hope we continue to develop even in less challenging times.

Practices to discontinue from this COVID year

While graduate students appeared more receptive to remote learning, undergraduate students struggled with “virtual everything.” The survey data revealed that asynchronous classes were especially challenging for our undergraduate students. Many students also reported that the workload for the remote courses could either feel “way too heavy” or “way too easy.” That said, students did share that they would like their professors to consider meeting online from time to time, including for office hours and an occasional remote class. Students also wanted faculty to consider letting them Zoom-in to an in-person class if they were sick or had an emergency.

Students from the focus group interviews shared that lecture-heavy classes were particularly challenging in remote contexts. They described them as “long and enormously boring” and urged

professors to “find a way to make our time a little better.” One student shared, “If [the class] is just a lecture, nine out of ten times I’m not going to go. It’s boring to me. I would much rather watch the lecture on my own time, pause when I need to, and *then* come to class to engage.” Students urged professors to make their classes more “engaging” and asked them to, “vary the way [they] teach.” Students did appreciate how some professors recorded their lectures so that students could watch them either before class (and then used the class time to actually discuss the content) or after class (as another way to review the content). This important feedback should be considered whether or not we are teaching remotely.

Conclusions

It is easy to frame the last 12 months through a deficit lens-- as one crisis after another that has resulted in grave mental health concerns and significant academic loss. But let us instead focus on the considerable growth that has occurred. Faculty have learned new and dynamic teaching strategies. Students have rapidly adjusted to new ways of learning. We have all gained critical awareness around the national reckoning with racism and inequity and have a clearer sense of the size and nature of the problems in our society. We have a better sense of the tools we need to reach and teach our students well. Let us hold on to some of these dynamic and empathetic teaching practices with the goal of ushering in a more effective and compassionate era in education.