

ADVICE

5 Myths About Remote Teaching in the Covid-19 Crisis

By Lee Skallerup Bessette, Nancy Chick, and Jennifer C. Friberg | MAY 01, 2020



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We knew this would happen. Just six short weeks ago (although they've felt long), we worried that academe's emergency shift to remote instruction would result in lots of folks trying to use this crisis to reach conclusions about the value of online teaching.

And like clockwork, we've seen misguided essays arguing that online learning is akin to teaching via TV in the 1960s and produces lower-quality courses with reduced expectations of students.

The framing and conclusions of such critiques are uninformed and reinforce pernicious myths about online education. They also misrepresent what's happened in college teaching generally in the wake of Covid-19. What gets lost in the rush to judgment is nuance.

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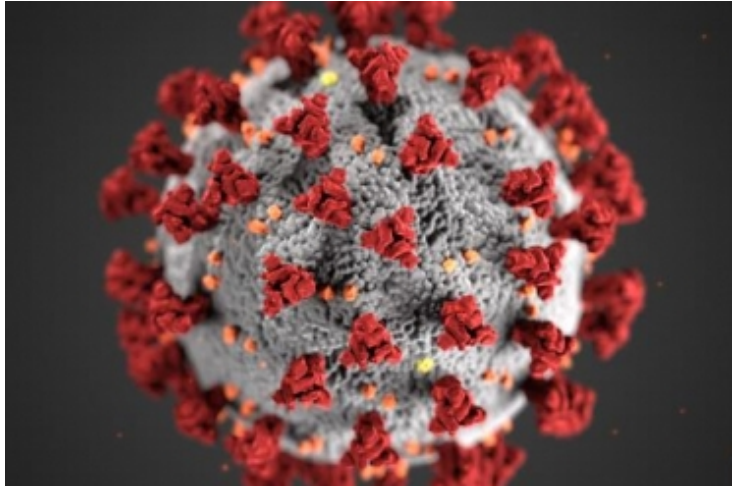
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Like everyone else, academics have been overwhelmed by the transitions we're all making at work and at home. Some faculty members have handled the emergency "online pivot" better than others. Most have given it their all. Our point in what follows is not to dismiss the concerns and criticisms but to put them in context and counter what we see as the five most damaging and unfair myths about this move to remote teaching.

Myth No. 1: Face-to-face classes suddenly became online courses. In fact, they didn't. What happened to teaching this spring was a temporary, emergency shift. It wasn't at all typical of online education.

It usually takes at least six months, and sometimes a year, to design, develop, and build an online course. In that process, faculty members work with instructional designers, technologists, and others on content delivery, assignment design, and assessment. It's about quality, not speed.

Because of how quickly Covid-19 hit, we simply didn't have the luxury of time for the careful design and preparation of typical online courses. Most institutions have shifted to remote teaching or distance learning in the simplest and most accessible ways possible — via basic tech tools on learning management systems, web conferencing

platforms, email, and phone.

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Academe was — and still is — in a time of "pedagogical triage," as we wrote in March in an analysis of higher education's shift to remote teaching. But triage was never the mission or purpose of online teaching. It needs to be more than that.

Myth No. 2: Campuses were unprepared for this unprecedented transition. The scale and speed of it? Absolutely. No one could have predicted a nationwide emptying of campus classrooms.

But the real revelation here is the remarkable ways in which many institutions mobilized the expertise in campus teaching centers, libraries, IT departments, and instructional-design offices to help faculty members become familiar with virtual teaching tools and environments very, very quickly. The things those experts have been doing every day in this crisis are the same things they've been doing for years, but with greater visibility now.

The level of preparedness for this emergency shift has varied from campus to campus. Some public institutions (with years of cuts in state appropriations) and some private colleges (with limited financial resources) are running on bare-bones administrative, infrastructural, and pedagogical support.

Yet, as is the case in many sectors of the economy now, volunteerism is exploding across higher education. Experts have been reaching out well beyond their campus borders to help others. Impromptu Facebook groups, public video tutorials, email lists, blog posts, collaboratively curated websites, and even offers of virtual class visits have popped up to offer support to faculty members at any type of institution.

Myth No. 3: The quality of instruction has suffered in our online pivot. That faculty members found this abrupt transition disruptive, unsettling, and dissatisfying is hardly surprising. A recent poll of faculty members and administrators at more than 600 institutions, by Bay View Analytics, reported: "At almost all (97 percent) of the institutions surveyed, faculty with no previous online teaching experience were called upon to move classes online. A majority of faculty respondents (56 percent) reported using teaching methods they had never used before. Roughly one-half of faculty

respondents (48 percent) reduced the amount of work they expected students to complete, while about one-third (32 percent) lowered their expectations for the quality of student work."

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Such results — presented without context — certainly make it seem as if the quality of instruction has suffered this semester. But in fact, faculty members' adjustments in this crisis are evidence of good teaching, not bad.

For anyone who has been paying attention, a large body of research has documented that good teaching is good teaching, whether it happens in a physical or a virtual classroom. Rather than a collection of tips and tricks, good teaching is guided by research on how students learn.

In adjusting their assignments, expectations, and grading this semester, countless faculty members are responding to the specific needs of their students right now, and how they learn. That's good teaching. The conversations we've all been having about how to reach students with limited access to technology or high-speed Wi-Fi — "Can students do this work from a phone?" "What learning activities can be shifted to asynchronous schedules?" "Is video really necessary for this conversation?" "How can I share my material without placing heavy demands on data download?" — are evidence of good teaching.

To have maintained the same expectations, to have kept assignments as planned, to have required the same amount of work and expected the same quality of work as before Covid-19 would have been bad, unethical teaching.

Myth No. 4: Faculty members didn't know what to do. When it comes to remote teaching, faculty members feel a "pervasive ... sense of 'I don't know what I'm doing,'" according to the lead researcher of the Bay View Analytics poll. That's an alarming statement taken out of context. Of course faculty members feel a level of anxiety and uncertainty about how well this semester has gone. Of course some didn't know how to use this technology or that tool. But that's very different from not knowing what they're doing in teaching students.

In fact, they did know what to do when they faced the unknowns of remote instruction. Many reached out to their campus colleagues — faculty developers, instructional designers, educational technologists, librarians — in unprecedented numbers to fill the gaps. In these circumstances, it doesn't take a village, it takes a campus. As more than one staff member in teaching centers and IT offices has said, "I never thought we would ever be considered essential services." [Sign up here](#) to keep up with the latest developments about COVID-19 and its impact on higher education. [Academe Today newsletter, first thing each morning.](#)

Professors also knew they could draw on research to guide them, including scholarship on teaching in times of crisis. A 2007 survey by Therese A. Huston and Michele DiPietro on what students wanted from their professors after September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina, and other "collective tragedies" is illuminating: Ultimately, students wanted their professors to "do something, just about anything."

That simple plea points to the immediate need for care and connection in teaching, wherever it takes place. In the first week after many campuses halted face-to-face instruction, social media was full of examples of how faculty members checked in with students (individually and classwide), and shared their own mixture of anxiety ("I'm figuring this out, too") and commitment to the students ("I've got you").

Faculty concerns about feeling out of their element and losing vulnerable students come from a place of deep empathy and care, and from a sense of humility in the face of global crisis, when, in some ways, none of us know what we're doing. Yet at the same time, we do know what to do to make it work: Look to expertise (including our own), listen, and adapt.

Myth No. 5: This is the end of higher education as we know it. This experience will be a game changer, and we don't yet know what all of those changes will be. The easy way forward would be to overrely on technological solutions. But the easy way isn't always the right way.

The wise way forward is to have nuanced, thoughtful conversations about how we're going to teach in the coming months. Faculty members have begun to re-examine their teaching practices and reconsider students' academic and emotional needs in new and different ways.

This crisis has also brought academics together. New communities of teachers have been built online, virtually overnight, for peer mentoring and resource sharing. Important conversations about how teaching has changed, and how it should change, are happening right now. It's not an end; it's a beginning.

In this new book, Kevin Gannon, a professor of history at Grand View University,

describes teaching as "a radical act of hope," "an assertion of faith," and "a commitment to the future even if we can't clearly discern its shape." Yes, teaching has

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changed. Yes, the months ahead look uncertain. But we'd prefer to look past the jeremiads to the research, the studies, and the articles on teaching, and find ways to change higher education for the better.

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