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Academia During the Pandemic: The Limits of Empathy and Compassion

The crisis-shift to online learning caught us all off guard. My partner and I live in Queens, NY, mere miles away from NYC’s COVID-19 epicenter. I was in the final stages of my doctoral program, teaching three sections of first-year global literature while furiously revising and prepping for my oral dissertation defense at the end of March 2020. Then came the crisis-shift. Nothing about the situation was ideal, not for students, instructors, or administration. My partner was working at another institution in the city as an adjunct instructor, but also as the Assistant Director of that campus’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), a small and understaffed department—like on many campuses, I’m sure—that soon became the lynchpin of the entire school for faculty needing help with their learning management system and online pedagogy. That is why I refer to what happened as the crisis-shift; not a transition to distance learning, not a conversion to remote teaching, nor any of the other polite terms often used to ease public anxiety. It was panic and chaos everywhere. But just like the doctors and nurses, the grocery store and pharmacy cashiers, everyone stepped up, doing the best they could despite reports of thousands dying around them, the fact of which was only reinforced by the relentless and inescapable echo of ambulance sirens throughout the city in those first few months.

The mantra coming out of the academy was, and to a certain extent still is, empathy and compassion for the students. Extensions became typical rather than exception. The standard A-F grading scale was accompanied by a pass/fail option for any who were struggling, and a multitude were. Learning still happened of course, but the priorities of so many had to shift. Out of the three sections I was teaching, a handful in each class contracted the coronavirus and were out for weeks. Others became caregivers for their grandparents, parents, or younger siblings, giving these students little time for their studies. Still others, initially working part-time as checkout clerks, delivery drivers, or one of the myriad jobs typical for college students, were suddenly deemed “essential” and found themselves in the surreal position of becoming the primary breadwinners of their household as the lockdown came and their parents lost their jobs. Empathy and compassion. Those who teach know the emotional labor that comes with the position. The psychic toll that semester took on us—all of us—is something that I think we will all live with for the rest of our lives. It wasn’t until I sat down to write this, began to reflect on those first few months and how we all struggled daily to keep it together, that things actually began to hit me. My partner and I were lucky, both still working and sheltering in place. We managed to sidestep much of the tragedy outside of our apartment. But it was still all around us. It was in the very air. Sitting here, now, waves of raw emotion compartmentalized back then out of necessity begin to wash over me.

In preparation for a continuance of remote learning in the fall, all faculty, both full-time and adjunct, were given the opportunity over the summer to sign up for an intensive, month-long bootcamp in online pedagogy. I, along with many instructors, put off
getting online certification prior to the crisis-shift, thus these sessions were a godsend. So many of us get caught up in our own fields and specializations that we tend to take for granted the hard work and dedication of those in our IT and CTL departments. Like all things, it’s not until we need them that they actually become important to us. I wonder how long it will take for that complacency to return as we pine for things to get back to “normal.”

Full-time faculty where I was teaching were of course given preference in taking these Online Essentials courses, followed then by contingent faculty. I know from my partner that, even before the pandemic, the City University of New York (CUNY) system runs such courses each day helping faculty to take them by offering a small (but not insignificant) stipend with the stipulation each instructor must teach an online or hybrid class the following semester. We, too, had these rolling online teaching certification courses, though faculty—at least contingent faculty—were never offered any kind of stipend. One might guess this practice, incentivizing professional development, might have lessened the immediate demand for such training during these first few months of the pandemic, but it did not. My partner was tapped to teach several ad hoc summer online pedagogy courses on top of being inundated with back-to-back Zoom appointments each day helping faculty in her role at CTL. Eighty-hour weeks became near standard for her. I spent that time hidden away in my makeshift office in the bedroom, taking what I had learned about online pedagogy to convert my lessons into online-friendly content and short, recorded lectures for fall, despite not yet having a contract.

The summer waned on and contracts finally came. Course offerings declined due to lower enrollment. Some students still returned to the dorms, but many of the classes offered were now hybrid (partially in person) or completely online. I do feel for the students who were robbed of their first-year experience, as well as for the parents, many of whom I’m sure wondered what the tuition they were paying went towards as their children sat alone or with roommates in dorm rooms staring at computer screens. At the same time, though, despite the feeling that our world had been upended, we all knew, or at least hoped, all of this was only temporary. Could be a semester, could be a year, but we would get through this. Initially I had thought about volunteering for the hybrid model. It would have been a new experience and, depending on how long the pandemic lasted, would have allowed me the chance to see what approaches did and did not work with COVID restrictions rather than being caught off guard when it was time to return to the classroom. My partner and I had some long discussions about the risks. I have no health insurance, so fully online seemed like the more prudent choice.

For me, the semester was to begin one week earlier than usual, and regular instruction was to end around the Thanksgiving break to capitalize on students returning home rather than coming back to campus for finals as they normally would. Moreover, all other federal holidays between September and December were waived, streamlining the weeks for optimum instructional utilization. It was inconvenient, yes, but so was everything else going on in the world. We, and forgive the collective we here, knew, that from an administrative standpoint this decision made the most sense. As far as I experienced, the grumbles were kept to a minimum.
Only a week or so into the semester, as we were all just beginning to get used to our new way of teaching, faculty were greeted with a rather unsettling notification from the university. If we wished to continue teaching online in the spring, we were required to submit a formal request to Human Resources specifying the reason, along with a doctor’s note justifying that request. Considering what was going on in the country at that time—yes, the hope of a vaccine by year’s end, but also the prediction of a second and more severe wave of COVID come winter, as well as an alarming percentage of the population who believed the pandemic was some sort of political hoax and thus dismissed public health guidelines—this announcement created a reasonable amount of panic. It wasn’t just that we had to request accommodations, but upon that request we then had to have a conversation with an HR representative about our medical history and that person would then decide whether our request should be approved or denied. Alarm bells immediately went off in my head.

As mentioned, I—along with a disturbingly high number of contingent faculty in this country—do not have health insurance. Adjuncts where I was teaching are designated “regular part-time staff,” and per the language in our collective bargaining statement, an adjunct does not meet the requirements to be offered healthcare benefits; however, they are eligible to “receive up to $1,500 per year” if they have taught at the university for three consecutive semesters. While this is sincerely appreciated, it does feel rather perfunctory for reasons that will become apparent. Our collective bargaining contract also states that adjuncts are restricted to no more than five courses in an academic year (a 2/3 or 3/2 load). This policy is in place to ensure contingent faculty are not taken advantage of, though also to ensure quality of the teaching by not overloading anyone. Given such restrictions, the maximum annual salary an adjunct can earn from the institution is somewhere around $16,000, in New York City, with a Ph.D. And that $1,500 for health insurance, that is a rebate offered at year-end only after submitting paperwork showing proof of purchase. One must be able to afford the insurance first before they are able to receive the tax break meant to offset the cost. The only way to piecemeal together something closer to a living income as an adjunct is to pick up courses at other institutions. However, since most colleges and universities have similar restrictions on how many courses an adjunct may teach per semester, the trick—from what I have been told—is to move between systems (i.e., public/private; state-to-state) so as not to raise any red flags. I know people who teach upwards of seven classes per semester between four or five different schools. This is the dirty little secret of the academy. It’s fine as long as no one waves it in front of the faces of administration; more of a guideline really than a rule. Besides, it’s not as if they aren’t already well aware, but as long as there are enough instructors to meet demand, everyone looks the other way. This is the reality for hundreds of thousands of college instructors in this country, only a fraction of whom have access to some kind of employer-based healthcare benefits, and that was prior to COVID-19. Empathy and compassion.

Before submitting a request all but certain to be denied, I reached out to my department head for clarification and advice, but also to voice concerns that went beyond my own situation. First, I wanted to know if I was reading the language of the faculty-wide email correctly; that if we did not have a medical reason deemed justifiable, we were
essentially being forced to return to face-to-face teaching come spring. In one short sentence I was told my understanding was correct. I sensed their own frustration by the brevity of their answer. We communicated back and forth a few more times, my final email reading as follows.

“I’m sure the decision-makers are thinking of everyone’s best interest. I was initially shocked when I read that first email due to the connotations behind the admin/HR speak. Yes, thinking about those like me who do not have a doctor because we cannot afford health insurance, but more so of those who may be immunocompromised in some way that does not affect the performance of their job, but now will be forced to have a conversation with HR about their condition. Someone with asthma may feel fine having that chat, but someone HIV positive might feel entirely different. I feel we are entering dangerous waters & want to at least voice such concerns before it turns into the kind of situation I fear it has the potential of becoming.”

I see a danger in simply acquiescing to such requests from administration/HR. Because we do not know how long COVID-19 will be with us, such new protocols of requesting health accommodations to teach online have the potential to become established practice as we rapidly approach our first year of the pandemic. Full-time faculty may be in a slightly stronger position, but adjuncts who don’t want to teach in-person run the risk of losing their contract altogether should they refuse to divulge their health records, with little legal recourse. While there is specific language in the Affordable Care Act protecting patients from being denied medical coverage based on preexisting conditions, no such language exists in Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) when it comes to employment, at least not that I could see. One might make a case using the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (2008), but I can see that being sidestepped as well. Such denial of a contract could be written off as an employee’s inability to perform their duties given the conditions of the workplace. Then of course we have those in my predicament, ineligible for employer-based health insurance because of our part-time status, but because of meager pay, cannot afford any kind of coverage that would even make sense to purchase. Without a note from a doctor, we have no other option but to put our health at risk if we wish to continue teaching. However inadvertent, such policies have the potential to turn into a kind of silent health-based class discrimination. Empathy and compassion. Such words now ring hollow, breeding resentment rather than the encouragement they were meant to instill.

Call me trepidatious, but with the direction the academy has been moving over the past several decades here in the United States, adopting more of a business model than one of education as a public trust, my worries don’t feel unfounded. Up until the pandemic, most adjuncts, though maybe not entirely happy, were content in their position as contingent faculty, viewing it as a steppingstone to get to that ever more elusive tenure-track position. Now, with student enrollment down nationwide and full-time faculty being assigned extra courses—those typically taught by contingent faculty—as a cost-saving measure, it is not hard to imagine a slow but steady departure of adjunct
instructors from the teaching pool. Empathy and compassion may be the new maxim of the academy in the pandemic, but that sentiment seems to be reserved for the students alone. Obviously, an institution of higher learning must remain financially solvent if it is to survive, but I worry there will be an unforeseen consequence if the decision-makers continue to put profit margins above the needs of those teaching most of their courses. Such shortsightedness could be what brings us closer to the very collapse the academy has feared and tried to stave off for years, hastened precisely through such cost-saving measures. We all would like to get things back to normal, but if COVID has taught us anything, it’s that “normal” for so many of us meant just scraping by. If we do not start investing in the people entrusted with teaching our future generations—that means an actual living wage and for God’s sake healthcare—we may want to reevaluate what it is we’re doing here. I know a lot of adjuncts already asking themselves that very question.