



GUEST COMMENTARY

Sharon B. Gusky,
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Pandemic Lessons: Building Empathy & Community

As we embark on another school year, one fraught with uncertainty as the pandemic lingers, I want to share a few things I experienced and learned during our rushed switch to remote learning this past spring. These lessons have influenced both my preparations for this new academic year and my approaches as a biology educator.

The lessons I learned came from the “we are in all this together, but our experiences are different” frame of mind, which helped to build empathy and community during the pandemic. My experience was vastly different than that of many people I know. My children do not live at home, my parents passed years ago, and I was already teaching half of my course load online. This made dealing with pandemic issues easier and less stressful, especially when compared to my students.

While I worked safely from home, my students continued to go to work. Like many community college students, they are CNAs, factory workers, and store clerks. They found themselves picking up more hours at work – leaving less time for their studies, and, overnight, their lives became a lot more stressful as they filled the roles of the front-line workers we all depend on. Suddenly the assignment deadlines, and even the assignments themselves, seemed trivial to me, compared to the stories of the COVID-19 patients my students were caring for, the elderly people they delivered food to that week, or the medical supplies they were producing at the local factory.

As I responded to my students’ questions and struggles, the decades-old call for more student-centered learning and the emphasis on depth over breadth – both of which I thought I had addressed in my courses – had new meaning. I found myself reworking assignments with my students’ struggles in mind and found new ways for them to meet the course outcomes.

Like you, I found that the pandemic highlighted the inequities between my students by emphasizing the great impact their life situations have on their academic performance. As we moved to online learning, some students struggled with their classes and began to fall behind as their time was now spent teaching their children or siblings, or caring for elderly and sometimes sick parents, while continuing to work full-time. Other students lost their jobs or had family members now at home who could provide child care and assist with other obligations. They now had more time to focus on their studies and began asking if they could complete missed assignments. They showed up for office hours and tutoring and were more engaged in the course. It quickly became evident that everybody was doing their best for the situation they were in. While this was true before the pandemic, everyone’s situation was more transparent now, and recognizing this made me more empathetic.

To address the changes in their lives, I gave my students the option to complete missed assignments without penalty, regardless of when in the semester they missed them, or to take an incomplete. All my students expressed appreciation for these options, and only one student actually took me up on the offer of an incomplete. In this, I learned that empathy goes a long way toward helping people do their best.

I applied these lessons when I redesigned my fall courses. I placed a greater focus on formative and low-stakes assessments, incorporated varied summative assessments, and added flexible due dates. The hope is that these changes will not only help me and my students be better prepared for the challenges the pandemic may bring this fall, but that they improve both student learning and the student experience by providing more flexible ways to meet the course outcomes.

Students were not the only ones needing help during this transition. Teachers also faced challenges when all instruction suddenly moved online. During those first weeks last spring, when we rushed to figure out how to teach and test remotely, I saw firsthand how our NABT community members supported each other. There was a flurry of activity on our NABT Facebook page, where you shared your problems, ideas, and concerns and worked together to find solutions and offer encouragement. Our partners, publishers, and sponsors also offered support, providing free and easy access to their resources to help smooth the transition to remote learning. The rapid responses and vast number of resources shared made it evident that we needed a better way to organize them for easy access. Volunteers, such as Catherine Ambos, stepped up immediately and compiled a resource page. As a result, we now have the sortable resource page found at <https://nabt.org/Resource-Recommendations>.

We have all learned valuable lessons in recent months and have had experiences that changed the way we view our teaching, our students, and even the needs of our colleagues. As we begin a new academic year, know that we are still in this together. I encourage you to continue to reach out to the NABT community for support and to share your experiences, resources, and inspirations.

This crisis will continue to influence the way we teach, but I know that our vast community of student-centered educators will use this experience to envision new ways to approach biology education, support our students, and provide valuable professional development experiences that will serve us and our students more effectively both now and in the future.

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