

Prologue: Our Journey through the Pandemic

Michael C. Morrone

Editor-in-Chief

Indiana University Bloomington

Christopher J. Young

Executive Editor

Indiana University Northwest

Rarely are we--we, in the largest sense--affected by a single event. When they do occur, we know that these broadly shared experiences are inherently historical: World War II, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (vicariously experienced across the world in real time via television and radio), and the Covid-19 pandemic.

As faculty in institutions of higher education, we, like others around the world and in different professions, faced an unprecedented experience. How we approached the experiences varied from instructor to instructor from institution to institution. Within these various experiences, paradoxically, there was a common thread: how to meet learning outcomes and achieve student success despite the sudden and radical shift in our and our students' lives.

As we considered, and then prepared a special issue on how the pandemic impacted teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning, it occurred to us that the *Hero's Journey* spoke to our common experience. We were forced from our normal lives into the unknown. As we moved into the unknown, we found allies and mentors. We learned new skills and strategies. We confronted difficulties and managed to overcome them, sometimes exceedingly well, sometimes we just survived. And now we prepare for a return to what doesn't feel like the old normal, but could be. What will we learn from this experience?

Spring semester 2020 started like any other spring semester at Indiana University. We developed our syllabi and schedules on our own timelines, knowing our institution's requirements for classes and deadlines such as for submitting textbook information. We met with colleagues on campus. We met with them off campus too, for lunch, happy hours, and celebrations. We conducted the university's business of teaching and learning in classrooms, in hallways, in offices. This is what normal looked like.

And then it all changed. At some point, we could sense that something was coming, but we were unsure what awaited. As the pandemic reached our national shores, we knew it was only a matter of time before the virus would reach us in the Midwest. We began to hear how universities on the West Coast were responding and we chatted amongst ourselves and our students about what might happen. Was it already here we wondered. Then national sports organizations began to pause their seasons and reality increasingly set in. And then it happened. On March 11, a message was received from President McRobbie that Indiana University's campuses would close for two weeks and then reopen with remote teaching and learning.

During those two weeks, faculty worked tirelessly to prepare their classes for remote teaching. A number of our manuscripts discuss this transition to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) contrasting ERT with courses that are fully prepared as online courses. Some with more experience teaching online or using the Learning Management System were able to make a smooth transition. Others, perhaps thinking that it was a matter of simply shifting classes to an online environment, faced serious challenges. For example, the shift from face-to face to the Zoom environment when teaching presentations required faculty to consider new criteria for assessing the students' communication skills.

In the classroom setting, the faculty member was able to assess eye contact, gestures, and other physical indicators required for excellent presentations. How does a faculty member assess a student who can simply read a script when speaking online? As these complications emerged, disparities in skill, comfort levels, creativity with technology, and flexibility with assessments (while maintaining the integrity of learning outcomes) became apparent and foreshadowed oncoming challenges.

Our faculty colleagues and teaching centers with experiences teaching in multiple modalities provided guidance, support, and reality checks. Teaching and Learning Centers (CTLs) and instructional technology personnel are staples at most colleges and universities. While a constant and regular presence, the profiles of the CTLs and instructional consultants and technologists suddenly took on added importance and centrality in helping faculty pivot their courses. It is not an overstatement that early in the pandemic many centers were highlighted by upper level campus administration, even on a daily basis. The skills of instructional consultants and learning technologists were at a premium as the entire university shifted to a variety of pedagogical modalities. As is discussed in a number of the manuscripts, the CTLs (and other administrative academic support structures) were leaned on to assist in making the *unprecedented* shift to remote learning.

We had familiarized ourselves with new technology, added ways to orient our students to our now remote classes, made scheduling adjustments that the new modality demanded, planned ways to share course content and resources, and reconceptualized learning activities and assessments. We were ready. We took the leap and began teaching remotely. Then we experienced the first outcomes of our adjustments, including initial failures, exposure of unexpected complications, and realizations that feeling connected with students was vastly different on the other side of the threshold. These initial outcomes were going to require additional, serious adjustments on the part of teacher and student. This was especially true as we prepared for the fall semester, with time to plan more carefully for quality online, remote, and multi-modal learning.

Beyond pedagogy, the pivot to remote learning during the Spring involved opening our personal lives and spaces to each other--as well as exposing our vulnerabilities. It also raised complicated questions regarding privacy. Moreover, awareness of mental health--again, our own as well as our students--was raised and had to be considered in new ways. It was no longer separated from our classes, delegated to mental health professionals. We gained a fuller appreciation of each other. This appreciation went beyond the classroom when faculty increasingly utilized academic support staff in ways they had not done so previously--this especially became apparent over the summer. While the phrase, "We are in this together" teetered on the brink of becoming a cliché, the deeper we entered into the unknown, it increasingly had the ring of Truth about it. In fact, the Truth of the phrase points to what may be one of the most important potential transformations in our collective approach to teaching and learning following the pandemic.

We have to acknowledge that the authors in this issue are self selected. They engaged in the process of pivoting their classes or supporting faculty as they did so, some perhaps with trepidation, but all with a deep commitment to student learning. High stakes assessments emerged as one of the greatest challenges faculty faced during the pandemic. How do you assess a nursing student's ability to complete a physical exam when physical proximity is impossible? How do you conduct a class in which sensory experiences are vital to learning? How do you learn modern dance on a two-dimensional screen, when dance is about movement in space?

With the high stakes challenges in sight, many of our authors transformed their assessments. What involved a sensory experience shared in the classroom could be recreated individually, recorded, and shared. Students could reflect on their experiences, though the experience was not shared simultaneously and in close proximity. Projects that required watching films led to conversations in students' homes. And these conversations changed the learning outcomes, actually providing opportunities for students to share their learning in unplanned ways. For some authors, the pandemic

itself became an important topic to which learning outcomes directly or indirectly related. Learning remained central.

As the spring 2020 semester concluded, our university president, [Michael McRobbie stated](#):

“We must also recognize that students' expectations of the quality of virtual instruction will be much higher next fall or spring than they were this spring. Everyone understood this semester that we moved very quickly to virtual instruction, which meant that the great majority of classes offered after spring break were neither intended nor designed for virtual delivery.”

His statement highlights the ongoing challenge to teaching and learning, emphasizing the need for intentional course design with learner-centered delivery of content, effective, well-planned student engagement, and uses of technology to support student success. Unlike the Spring, there would be a variety of modalities available to students: online, remote, mixed modality, and face-to-face. Issues of technology, student-to-space ratio, and in-class protocols were now regular points of conversation for Restart Committees across the country. Faculty continued to expand their skill sets both pedagogically and technologically, the community of faculty and students demonstrated increased empathy that benefited the learning process, and again mentors came into play, including yeoman efforts by information technology services.

When we returned in the Fall, we were asked to make flexibility and empathy central to our “new normal.” We had prepared to juggle courses with different modalities and knew to expect shifts in attendance. What we didn’t know were the demands of endless Zoom meetings and the need for flexibility that required emotional energy. Our day-to-day reality was almost constantly interrupted with quarantines, family illness, job losses, and a general sense of lost control--it felt precarious. These realities left many students and faculty exhausted.

And now we may return to our previous normal. In the last year, we did adapt to the pandemic context, with new expectations, new experiences, and new strategies. Also, new realities such as the loss, in some parts of the country, of the magical snow day! We did solidify the sense that we are confederates in student learning and wellness. We did reimagine learning activities and ways to measure student learning. As we prepare to return to normal, we know that expectations have changed, teaching should be more flexible and responsive to context and student needs. Will the alternatives in teaching and learning mean we can better support learning, increase belonging, and meet student needs? Will we build on the collaboration among the faculty, administration, and staff that allowed us to navigate the urgent pivot into the unknown?