

March 16, 2020
John Scenters-Zapico

Gut Feelings
March 16, 2020

Even now as we seem to be well into the Coronavirus pandemic, I still feel like I am in the dark. But I had a gut feeling this thing was going to be serious, yet I also have the voice of the younger me who regularly wished for snow days in Wisconsin. As a Californian now, I stare out the windows, and can walk, and stretch in my yard without having to put on a jacket, boots, etc. It's in the 60s, sunny, and it looks perfect. Sickness just doesn't seem to be here or everywhere, but it is. What was my gut telling me? Was I jumping the gun, paranoid?

In March my school sent us a general notification that we should start thinking about offering our classes online. This sparked lots of online discussion among instructors about teaching online. A few instructors dominated the initial discussion with questions about teaching pedagogies, and such. Initially, I was shocked by my colleagues concern over pedagogical delivery when we were dealing with Coronavirus, a scary and very deadly one. (I include actual emails in this document for historical record, but I remove all names.)

Pedagogical List-serve email

3-6-2020

I understand everyone is freaked out, and I understand that in some contexts it might be a good idea to move instruction online. However, I wish that we could also acknowledge that making *all* classes go online is—for many classes, particularly those based on quick student-centered interaction—a really bad pedagogical model. So by all means move online, but let's not pretend that all students will learn as much as they would in face-to-face instruction. Just an acknowledgement of that fact would go a long way!

A response I never sent but wrote and discarded, said something like, If you or your students are sick and/or dyeing, you can't teach face-to-face or online. The key now is to protect all of us. I never sent it, as I do with so many of my "disagreement" drafted emails.

I decided to listen to at least a partial gut message and on Monday, March 9, I went to teach and asked my students what they know and how they were feeling about Coronavirus. We talked about all the miscommunications by our nation's leaders, botched tests, poor data reporting . . . They had a lot on their minds.

I mentioned that the news says anyone with chronic respiratory issues should avoid close contact and crowded places. In the back of my mind floated the fact that I have chronic bronchitis and tend to get upper respiratory infections this time of year and am usually prescribed some sort of antibiotic. I guided my students to keep their eyes on their emails because my gut said things could change quickly, but not to worry, because we could quickly go online. I know most of my students are graduating seniors, so they worry. I left class wondering if I had raised worry when I shouldn't have. I did the same in my Tuesday class.

On Wednesday, March 11, when I started going through my morning emails, I had received a ton, many from students telling me that classes would be cancelled. The message we all received I post below.

CSULB's president's email

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Wed 3/11/2020

Dear Beach Community:

As we've communicated over the past few weeks, we've been engaged in ongoing planning since the emergence of novel coronavirus, or COVID-19. While there are no cases of COVID-19 related to our campus, as a preventative measure and with trusted medical advice, we are temporarily suspending the in-person, on-campus convening of classes.

This action is a proactive step being taken because of our commitment to your health and safety and supports the concept of "social distancing." Research shows that reducing the concentration of people in an area can lower the infection risk for everyone involved. As the number of cases grow in Los Angeles County, this step very well may save lives and it is on the advice of our medical professionals that we take this step.

To allow our faculty to make final preparations for alternative delivery of instruction, face-to-face classes are canceled from Thursday, March 12 through Tuesday, March 17, although the campus will remain open. Alternative instruction will begin on Wednesday, March 18. Online classes will continue as scheduled.

Some courses will continue to meet in person if alternative instruction is not appropriate, such as some laboratory, performing-arts, and physical-education courses. Accommodations associated with social distancing will be implemented in these courses. Students: please look for communications from instructors about plans for individual courses. Reach out to your instructors if you have questions.

We are currently anticipating the conclusion of alternative delivery of instruction and resumption of regular operations on Monday, April 20 barring any change in our safety assessments.

The campus is not closing. Campus offices and buildings will remain open and many operations will continue normally, including student housing and related dining facilities. Our Beach Athletics teams will continue to compete. Students who need computers or WiFi will find appropriate resources on campus in the library and Horn Tech Center. Staff should continue to report to work on site. However, as noted in a recent campus email, if you have an underlying health concern that you believe puts you in a high-risk group, you may investigate an accommodation.

The university has developed a framework for assessing what events may be booked, rescheduled, or canceled. No new third-party events will be scheduled for dates prior to May 1. The framework assesses whether or not the event experience can be offered in an alternative way; if participants will be traveling by air to attend; if participants are from populations that are high-risk for infection; if social-distancing and other preventative procedures can be

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successfully implemented; and what guidance is offered by public-health officials. This action, I know, will cause great hardship. It is, however, the appropriate action for our community to take.

I know there are many questions and as the situation with COVID-19 evolves in our community we will continue to update you through email and our COVID-19 informational website. Currently on the website you can find up-to-date health information, along with additional information about “social distancing”.

Whether on campus or not, enhance your personal efforts to avoid infection. Washing hands and social distance are two vital strategies for health during this difficult time.

Wow, I thought to myself. I set out to inform my classes not to panic, that we would be adjusting our syllabi, and to keep me in the loop if they experience any difficulties or need any help or guidance. I felt pretty secure about my classes, and I reflected on a conversation I had before school started, in August, with someone who told me my syllabi are too detailed, usually 20-25 pages. I justify that by pointing out I do this for students who may have missed class, who need extra detail over the weekend, and so that bad information won't get passed from one student to another. I want to point out the extra detail doesn't always work, but I think it has successes, too, and Coronavirus created a positive outcome for me and my students with the (over) detailed syllabi.

Then came the deluge of “Help Me” email requests, and the “I Can Help You” emails responding from colleagues. I found the latter to be a relief, not so much for me, but for the willingness to share and help. At some point our Tech Support jumped in, and it appeared they wanted everyone to convert from F2F to 100% online, and it was here folks started to despair. I knew many, many people were not aware of and uninterested in online tools, such as Zoom, Blackboard, etc., but the pages and pages of “How To” documents swirled into our in-boxes.

Throughout the day we received a wave of emails, what I call “Take It Easy” advice. I, too, felt some relief from these. They give me perspective, especially on the bigger picture of what we are dealing with, and on the impact on all of our lives. Breathe.

Here is one that slowed me down in my rush to update myself on some of the tools I had no need for until yesterday.

Insert Advice email

Wed 3/11/2020

I hope everyone is having an excellent day J! I've been following all the discussions about how to adjust our instruction (i.e., how to keep our students learning), and I've found most of it overwhelming and unhelpful. I did see one response on a different forum (from Prof. Amy Young at Pacific Lutheran University) that I found useful, so I thought I'd share it here (adjusted to our campus):

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1. **Be kind to yourself and your students.** Everyone is stressed, even if they're playing cool. That includes faculty. And that's OK.
2. Let's acknowledge that **the quality of education will not be as good in alternative formats as it is in the pedagogical model we've actually planned for.** That's OK as well—we're just trying to survive.
3. **Do not read on best practices for distance learning.** That's not the situation we're in. We're in triage. Distance learning, when planned, can be really excellent. That's not what this is. Do what you absolutely have to and ditch what you can. Thinking you can manage best practices in a day or a week will lead to feeling like you've failed.
4. You will not recreate your classroom, and you cannot hold yourself to that standard. **Moving a class to a distance learning model in a day's time excludes the possibility of excellence.** Give yourself a break.
5. **Prioritize:** what do students really need to know for the next few weeks? This is really difficult, and, once again, it means that the quality of teaching and learning will suffer. But these are not normal circumstances.
6. **Stay in contact with students, and stay transparent.** Talk to them about why you're prioritizing certain things or asking them to read or do certain things. Most of us do that in our face-to-face teaching anyway, and it improves student buy-in because they know content and delivery are purposeful.
7. Many universities have a considerable number of **pedagogical experts on academic technology** that we have only been dimly aware of until yesterday. **Be kind** to these colleagues. They are suddenly very slammed.
8. If you're making videos, **student viewership drops off precipitously at five minutes.** Make them capsule videos if you make them. And consider uploading to Youtube because it transcribes for you. Do not assume your audio is good enough or that students can understand without transcription. This is like using a microphone at meetings—it doesn't matter if you don't need it; someone else does and they don't want to ask. At the same time, of course, think about intellectual property and what you're willing to release to a wide audience.
9. **Make assignments lower or no stakes** if you're using a new platform. Get students used to just using the platform. Then you can do something higher stakes. Do not ask students to do a high stakes exam or assignment on a new platform.
10. **Be particularly kind to your graduating seniors.** They're already panicking, and this isn't going to help. If you teach a class where they need to have completed something for certification, to apply to grad school, or whatever, figure out plan B. But talk to them. Radio silence, even if you're working, is not okay.

I wrote a public thank you to my colleague for sharing this and wrote another to author. Sharing and kindness can be more contagious than Coronavirus, I hope.

Today it is cloudy in Southern California, it's been raining on and off, and it's in the 50s. It feels surreal. My wife went to the grocery store and most items are sold

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out. I read there are fights at Costco. People call 911 for people who cut in front of each other. People are scared. People are banned from Amazon and arrested for price gouging, while others brag they made a quick \$100,000 selling hand cleaner. At home at my laptop I ordered from Costco delivery, but it will take five days because there is a shortage of shopper and delivery drivers (probably some of my students?), and they can't guarantee any of the items I ordered. The phone rings and my wife's friend tells her she hoarded toilet paper and paper towel, so if we run out she'll deliver some to us. I don't condone the hoarding, but I like the sharing spirit and hope we all rediscover how powerful sharing is.

So I sit here, looking ahead on my syllabi, wondering what is going on in my students' worlds. They have to work outside their homes. I know statistically most work 2-3 jobs, take several classes, commute 1 1/2 hours a day, and have children or family members they care for. They are already stretched thin. Dark under eye circles don't lie. And now that I don't see them, I wonder what is going on in their lives. Next week I have planned to hold Zoom conferences with them, to hear how this has changed their lives. In the back of my mind I feel guilty for not being physically present to help and answer questions in a face to face setting, which is what we all signed up for. Online is not bad and at least we have it and the various teaching tools our schools have invested in. With Coronavirus online instruction is a potential lifeline for our students. So, I sit here typing away with my four dogs, Winston, Styles, Charlie, and Happy, watching me until I get up and take them out. I feel ready. I am not sick. I worry though. I might be comfortable with my classes online, all set, but I now worry what would happen if our systems are hacked and infected with their own computer Coronavirus? Breathe. Inhale. Exhale. One step, one day, at a time.