

Teaching: ‘Fluid and Chaotic’: Instructors Head Back Into the Classroom

By Beth McMurtrie

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This week:

- I talk to instructors about why this fall may be even harder than last year.
- I share resources to help you adjust to teaching under Covid — again.
- I tell you about a webinar with Beckie and other *Chronicle* reporters talking about their work.

‘Just Cannon Fodder’

Last year, Silvia Secchi, a professor at the University of Iowa, headed into the fall semester with some trepidation but a clear understanding of how she was planning to teach. She ran her two courses in a hybrid model, where some students were in person, wearing masks and spread out. Those who needed to quarantine attended remotely.

This year Secchi, who teaches in the department of geographical and sustainability sciences, is far less certain of what to expect, or how she can modify her teaching. Classes will be held in person, but there is no more social distancing. And Iowa is not allowing its public colleges to mandate masks or vaccines.

In her first week of class, about half of her students wore masks. In her smaller class of 60, students work collaboratively, which means people from those two groups may end up together, since she is not allowed to treat students differently based on mask wearing. Remote teaching options are also much stricter. If she gets sick, she is allowed to go online only briefly and will then have to find a colleague to teach her class in person, which seems both impractical and unethical.

“These policies,” she says, “really make you feel like we’re just cannon fodder.”

The Delta variant, along with laws and policies in some states limiting how much authority administrators and professors have around health and teaching protocols, has thrown a monkey wrench in return-to-campus plans. Iowa may be an extreme example, but professors across the country are unclear on how they are supposed to adapt to Covid in the classroom. Should they record their lectures in case students start getting sick? What's the tipping point at which they might want to turn to hybrid teaching or go entirely online? If they need to quarantine, who teaches the class and how? And, most importantly, who makes these decisions?

“None of it is intuitive,” says Jody Greene, associate vice provost for teaching and learning at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Classes start in a few weeks and Greene is scrambling to figure out what kinds of teaching, technology, and other support faculty members will need, while seeking guidance and coordination from her administration. “The range of questions you’re dealing with that involves health specialists, legal specialists, faculty representatives, student groups — it’s a lot.”

Each campus, and professor, faces their own particular set of challenges. Instructors who spent last year online, for example, may be navigating the logistics of teaching in a mask for the first time. That is the case with Deborah Beck, a professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin. After doing her own research, she decided to purchase a microphone, along with a clip-on speaker, with her own money.

She has found the guidance coming from the administration to be of little help — it is either too general or too specific, she says. It’s unclear to her what options there are for moving online, or teaching in a hybrid format, should cases rise. And the classrooms she is teaching in have limited infrastructure to support Zoom and cameras.

“Within my department, people are supporting each other and doing their very best to be helpful,” she wrote in an email. “But there’s a limited amount we can do as a department without clearer and stronger leadership from the university.”

Staff at teaching and learning centers are scrambling: fielding questions from instructors who are teaching in yet another mode this year; providing advice on how to handle student absences under Covid, and helping professors cope with exhaustion and fear.

“Not only is it different, it’s worse,” says Joshua Eyler, director of faculty development at the University of Mississippi. While the campus has a mask mandate,

Mississippi has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country and there is no more social distancing in classrooms. “Faculty are nervous, anxious, and super stressed both for themselves and their families.”

Like a lot of faculty developers, Eyler is encouraging professors to build flexibility into their syllabus to deal with Covid absences. He’s helping them think about creating alternative assignments and assessments for those who can’t be in person. Yet he also doesn’t want to saddle them with more work.

“The bigger battle is less about giving people advice and more about trying to keep the burden off of faculty who might feel pressure to do triple times the work if a student is out with Covid,” he says. “It’s all very fluid and chaotic.”

He is also deeply worried about the emotional and psychological stresses being placed on instructors and staff. Last year, people were willing to work overtime because they saw hope on the horizon once vaccines came along. That’s no longer the case.

“Last fall I would have told you this is really hard,” Eyler says. “But right now I think we’re at an unsustainable level.”

Resources for Teaching Under Covid This Fall

Last week Beckie moderated a virtual forum in which panelists discussed some of the ways instructors can support student learning this fall. You can watch a recording on demand here.

Following are some related readings and resources:

“10 Course Policies to Rethink on Your Fall Syllabus” — a *Chronicle* opinion article

“How to Make Mental Health a Top Priority This Fall and Beyond” —
a *Chronicle* opinion article

Resources from one of the panelists, Regan A.R. Gurung, associate vice provost and executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Oregon State University:

- [“Pandemic Teaching: Getting CCOMFE for the long ride ahead”](#) — blog post about being Compassionate, Clear, Organized, Multifaceted, Flexible, and Engaging
- [“Writing a Warm Syllabus”](#)
- [“Should You Make Slides/Notes Available?”](#)
- [“Should Technology \(Laptops/Tablets\) Be Allowed in Class?”](#)

Resource from another panelist, Sarah Rose Cavanagh, associate director of the D’Amour Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College:

- [“Using a Backchannel in In-Person Synchronous Classes”](#) — from the University of Guelph’s Office of Teaching and Learning

Talk to Us

As *Chronicle* reporters, we often get questions about how our work is produced. What can professors expect if they agree to an interview with a reporter? How should they reach out about a development they think we ought to cover? To answer these and other questions, Beckie will be joining a couple of our colleagues for a virtual event on Monday, September 13. Please join if you’re able, and spread the word to anyone you think might want to attend. [More information is here.](#)

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

— Beth

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