You Can't Ignore That a Pandemic Happened

A recent *Times* op-ed unfortunately flattens what should be a more nuanced and complex discussion.

By John Warner

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I am concerned that the understandable desire to get beyond the extreme challenges of trying to educate in the midst of the worst period of the pandemic is interfering with some deeper questions, some more nuanced conversations we should be having about teaching and learning.

My present concern stems from a recent op-ed in *The New York Times* by Jonathan Malesic, a college instructor and author of the recently published *The End of Burnout: Why Work Drains Us and How to Build Better Lives*. (Highly recommended.)

It feels weird that I'm about to pick a fight with a piece where I agree with the essential thrust of the argument—namely that education is a human enterprise and we must put that notion at the core of how we think about our classes and our higher education institutions.

But I think there are important differences in how we frame and discuss the problem between what I believe is necessary and what Malesic presents in his essay. Malesic observes what many have been reporting and experiencing—absent students, late assignments, lackluster in-class discussion, an overall feeling of disengagement—and advocates for a return to a pre-pandemic status quo as a way to “rebuild” students’ “ability to learn.”

He says, “The accommodations for the pandemic can either end or be made permanent,” and the proper choice is for “everyone involved—students, faculties, administrators, and the public at large—must insist [emphasis mine] on in-person classes and high expectations for fall 2022 and beyond.”

As I say, I am sympathetic to what underlies this argument. I’ve said many times that there is no substitute for the face-to-face, one-on-one conference when it comes to helping a student working on their writing. There are workarounds, but those workarounds are not necessarily substitutes.
But I am troubled by the false choice that Malesic puts at the center of his recommendations that we have two routes—either end accommodations or make them permanent. I think this is unfortunately reflective of a certain strain of broader thinking about the pandemic that posits the best way to respond is to return to the pre-pandemic status quo.

I think there is a third option, which is to apply a pedagogical lens to the structural problems that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and work with students to create the maximum possible human connection that is also consistent with lives that are both complicated and, in many cases, have been inextricably altered by the pandemic itself.

There are some things I would like us to consider as we confront the ongoing recovery from the worst of the pandemic.

**Things weren't going great in terms of student engagement prior to the pandemic.**

Prior to the pandemic, there were significant concerns about student engagement and learning (*Academically Adrift*, anyone?), as well as student anxiety and depression. For sure, the pandemic period has been worse, and the enforced isolation has no doubt been a contributing factor, but it would be a shame to fail to acknowledge and address the already extant problems just because things are even worse.

We can, and should, do better than that.

**The pandemic has not been an experiment in alternative pedagogies.**

As I wrote at the outset of the pandemic in late March of 2020 ([https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/not-experiment](https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/not-experiment)), it is important not to see the pedagogical responses made exigent by the pandemic as an “experiment.”

Rather, we were experiencing what I call “a period of emergency distance instruction.” It is impossible to judge the efficacy of accommodations made during an acute phase of a pandemic to their use in a less acute or non-pandemic period.

Malesic believes that pandemic-driven policies such as “recorded lectures, flexible attendance and deadline policies, and lenient grading,” have been a problem because “they make it too easy for students to disengage from classes.” Essentially, if you give students permission to drift, some (even many) will do so, harming their ability to complete the necessary work.

Having used a number of these approaches—no mandatory attendance policy, flexible deadlines, ungrading—prior to the pandemic, I can report that they were in fact important factors in increasing
student engagement. You cannot run an experiment on approaches to pedagogy with the wild card of a pandemic in the midst of everything.

(For an excellent example of what experimenting with pedagogy looks like, I recommend Richard J. Light’s essay on changing the mode of delivery in a first-year seminar from one semester to the next, recently published here at Inside Higher Ed. I do not know how long it truly takes for a reset following this kind of event, but a few months does not seem sufficient to me.

To take a present snapshot in the midst of the first semester of attempting a return to in-person schooling following almost two years of a global pandemic and place blame on the pedagogical practices for the difficulties of this return is both shoddy logic and shoddy pedagogy.

In-person does not necessarily mean human-centered education.
I have seen multiple laments on Twitter from faculty lamenting that now that their lectures are being streamed and/or recorded, they are speaking to empty rooms. Malesic seems to suggest that the remedy for this is to “insist” on a return to in-person attendance as a way to help students get back into their pre-pandemic habits.

I see several holes in this thinking. First, perhaps we should consider whether or not those empty lecture halls are telling us something about how students value and consume lectures. If the alternatives are viewed as somewhere between good enough and superior, why should they be expected to fill the room at an appointed time to listen to faculty speak?

One of the faculty members Malesic interviews for his piece has a potential answer: “What makes me an effective instructor has a lot to do with my personality, how I engage in the classroom, using humor. I’m very animated. I like to walk around the classroom and talk with students.”

This is another notion I am sympathetic to. I put a lot of time into and took a lot of pride in the quality of my in-class periods, both the time I spent structuring them for maximum benefit and the energy and spirit I brought to the act.

But like those faculty who want to shut off the recording devices for their lectures so they can have an audience, this is a fundamentally instructor-centric view of learning. Don’t get me wrong, instructors are important to helping students learn, but by making our presence, our personalities central to the equation, we are actually limiting the potential of students to learn.
The instructor will not always be present to bring the material alive. And for some students, even if they have a strong desire to be present, circumstances may not allow it. For this reason, the material and the learning must be central, not the instructor’s presentation of the material.

If we first consider how we would get students engaged if we had to “teach from a distance” (https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/figuring-out-how-teach-distance), our presence will then be additive, rather than strictly necessary for learning to occur.

Online, hybrid and HyFlex modes are not interchangeable, but neither are they necessarily inferior to in-person education depending on the subject, situation and student. We do a disservice to short-circuit these pedagogical considerations in the interest of pushing for a return to a default of in-person instruction.

There is no inherent incompatibility between structure and flexibility, and forced compliance is not an aid to learning.
Throughout the piece Malesic suggests that the pandemic-necessitated measures have allowed the worst instincts of students (or, more accurately, humans in general) to kick in, and that greater structure, less flexibility and fewer accommodations would ultimately be in students’ own best interests.

Here again is another false choice. A course can be highly structured, flexible and rigorous simultaneously. One of the reasons I introduced flexible deadlines into my courses was to simultaneously increase the rigor and to give students an opportunity to turn in their best work.

It was my observation that this could be achieved if I helped students learn to manage rather than meet deadlines (https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/deadlines-real-world). When I employed significant deadline penalties, I would often get students turning in work simply to have something (anything) to meet a basic requirement. This work would often be lackluster, a condition as apparent to the student as it was to me. When I allowed for some flexibility with deadlines, students could plan around their school/work/life schedules and put in greater effort, increasing their engagement while hopefully also decreasing anxiety.

This approach required students to learn how to fulfill their academic responsibilities beyond the minimum required for the grade. I would argue that my expectations for students were higher than previously by requiring them to confront their expectations for themselves and claim agency over their own educations.

Malesic isn't clear on who should “insist” on in-person learning or what that insistence should look like, but if it is a recommendation to utilize the cudgel of compliance, that strikes me as a possible mistake. We should instead do more work to both build our courses in ways that make attendance and
engagement rewarding for students and to listen to what students need in order to access what institutions have to offer.

We have much more to learn on that front, and while the gap between the operations of the university and the mission of teaching and learning was exacerbated by the pandemic, it wasn’t created by it.

No doubt students will need help to recover from the pandemic and reintegrate schooling into their lives, but what this looks like and how students can be supported is a more complex problem than Malesic presents in his op-ed.

Read more by

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