New Opportunities for Equity-Mindedness by Jeni Ussery

At this year’s NOSS meeting in March (as I write this, only a month ago, BUT WHAT A MONTH IT HAS BEEN!) the Equity, Access, and Inclusion Network (formerly the Cultural Diversity Committee) sponsored a conference session in which we discussed various ways in which equity could or should inform our practice. My section of the presentation focused on equity in assessment, on my personal journey of growth in how I perceived and implemented equitable classroom and course assessments, and in facilitating an exercise in which I asked participants to critique an anonymous syllabus in terms of how it might disenfranchise various communities of learners (spoiler alert: it was my syllabus from my first semester of teaching and it was pretty terrible).

Little did I know that a week later, we would all be reconsidering our own syllabi as colleges and universities around the country rapidly moved most instruction online to cope with the challenges of the COVID-19 virus. The sudden and dramatic move to online instruction is not my topic here today: excellent articles have already been published and widely dispersed over the past month by wiser souls than I regarding the ways in which we should move to emergency online teaching.

But when the adjustment has been made and we start to move out of emergency mode with regards to our teaching, our students’ learning, and maybe even the world, how can we learn from this experience? How can the changes we have made in response to a global pandemic highlight the ways in which we might better serve students? How can the extraordinary flexibility we have demonstrated be leveraged in our future courses? In what ways might this abrupt and unasked for interruption in our practice help reveal the ways in which we were stuck in old routines which no longer served us or our students?

Most of us have heard stories from our students at this point about what their lives are like right now. They’ve lost a job. They’re at home with younger siblings and are expected to keep them safe. They are being asked to work double shifts. They must make their own facemasks. They are suddenly homeschooling their children. They are out of toilet paper. They went home
for Spring Break on March 6 and now can’t get back. They are cut off from seeing their extended social network. They do not have the technology they need to transition to online learning. Their family member has become ill and needs care.

In response to these needs, many of us have made changes to assignments, our parameters for demonstrating success, and our requirements for engagement in the course. We’ve tested countless iterations of conferencing software, trying to find the best fit for our students and the needs of our class. We’ve slashed assignments, focusing with laser precision on the best ways for students to demonstrate competency in our course objectives. We’ve given extensions, gone asynchronous, learned how to create captions, and created veritable Rube-Goldberg machines that allow us to show a PowerPoint, our faces, and us drawing on a legal pad to our students at the same time in a YouTube video. We have found new and innovative ways to connect current events with the content of our course, ensuring that we are making this learning relevant to our students now. We have allowed modifications for assignments—a reflection paper has become a reflection video; a capstone project on local history has become a crowd-sourced student blog on daily life during COVID-19; and internships, work experiences, and other service-learning opportunities are being reinvented at every turn.

We are all bound in a common purpose to help our students find success. We may have differing beliefs about what best serves our students at this time (I have seen, among my colleagues near and far, a lively and spirited debate about synchronous versus asynchronous classes) and we may have constraints upon us which we do not control (the particular technologies that are licensed or used by our institutions, for example). But as we are making the choices we do have available to us, we are actively considering our students and their stories—the student who doesn’t have a computer at home and is trying to finish the class on her mobile phone; the student who works in healthcare and is finishing a double shift to come home to try to finish an essay for his English class; the student whose grandfather has suddenly fallen ill. These situations are not unique to this time, but they take on a new poignancy in a time of global pandemic. I have heard from many of my colleagues around the country about the extraordinary grace that they are extending to students at this time for circumstances beyond their control.
What I ask is that we remember this: our new perspective on the lives of our students, our
flexibility in meeting their needs, our capacity for grace—I ask that we remember all of this as we are planning our courses for the future. These situations are not unique to this time, and I hope that our extraordinary work to meet our students’ needs in the spring of 2020 turns out not to be extraordinary at all.

As you look at your syllabus moving into the future, I hope that you question it critically and then recognize where you already shine. I hope that you dig into critique of your own practice as diligently as the participants in our conference panel dug into my terrible syllabus, then acknowledge the growth that this critique represents. I hope you consider how each piece of your course serves the broadest possible contingent of students. I hope that you write and rewrite and rewrite your assessment schema, considering carefully the student populations for whom that schema will be helpful and for whom it might be disenfranchising. I hope, most of all, that you do all of this with your students, our students, all students, in mind. We have, in the midst of this epidemic, the opportunity to do real, lasting, and meaningful work to provide a more equitable educational experience for our students.