

Caught Mid-Semester in Pandemic Teaching Mode
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The first pandemic semester ended for me on May 21, 2020, when I recorded the grades for the advanced Japanese language students in my 400-level class on Japanese culture and society. The course required Japanese language skills and knowledge to research resources concerning social issues in Japan. It was a divinely small class of twelve students. I've had a few smaller classes in past years, genuine seminars, but in this age of severe university budget cuts this one felt like a luxury.

At the beginning of the semester, when we were still face-to-face in an honest-to-god classroom, I had the students arrange their chairs in a semicircle. It encouraged interaction with me and the other students, and although I used PowerPoints to hold forth on a lot of the material, I tried to elicit opinions and comparative knowledge in a two-way dialogue, based on what the students knew about both Japanese and American society today. I sat in a chair on their level, hoping to give the sessions a certain egalitarian feel that would encourage discussion. A mixed success.

We took up social issues in common with the Japanese that have a direct bearing on the quality of the class members' own lives, like casualization of labor and its grim career prospects among youth, marriage and cohabitation, reproductive health and control of fertility, and social media use and abuses. A few other topics were new to them, like a comparison of Japanese and American militarism. Given the trillions of dollars (this is no exaggeration) the US is spending on perpetual wars of choice, gold-plated weapons systems and over 800 overseas military bases, I can only hope my students realized that this was no "academic" exercise.

Each class was 75 minutes long and, although I can carry on animatedly for much longer than that if the subject is Japanese society, that's actually a hell of a long time for anyone to concentrate. Since everyone but me was bound to float in and out of awareness, I occasionally broke the monotony in the classroom by stopping for stretch exercises with the help of a traditional Japanese radio exercise routine (*Rajio taisō--ichi, ni, san, shi!*).

Then all of this got knocked out by the pandemic.

Once we went to distance ed via Zoom in late March, it was yours truly talking into a computer screen. I felt like an AM radio talk show host. Sure, I could see the students, but their faces were distant squares in a window, mostly expressionless and, if they laughed at my jokes, anything I actually heard in reaction was muffled. As for mid-session group calisthenics, two of the students told me they were in cramped bedrooms without enough room to move around.

I have always despised "MOOCs" --massive online open courses-- as an administration scam designed to rake in tuition bucks while cranking out the graduation numbers on the cheap, under the pretext of reaching students who otherwise couldn't get an education. (Take note:

whenever someone uses the expression "new normal," ask yourself if it's a compromise that's fattening someone else's bottom line.) Yet here I am in distance education land, participating in it all as best I can, because I don't want to leave our students dangling in the wind and neither do my fellow faculty.

I won't go into mind-numbing detail about all the adjustments we had to make, like new ways of administering quizzes and making corrections on paper drafts, and I won't complain more because I haven't had it anywhere near as hard as the Japanese language faculty. They have had to scramble to figure out how to simulate classroom drills, group work, and other iterative verbal classroom exercises. I imagine it was like having to play a Mozart clarinet concerto on a kazoo, but their professional sense of duty and pride led them to devote heroic effort to the transition.

The students are gone now, and I miss them. It hurts me to know, too, that their future is in limbo, thanks to an economy that was already on its way to complete shitification (thank you, Matt Taibbi, for that totally apt term) even before the pandemic squeezed the last breath out of it. I'm proud of my students who persevered in the face of such adversity, and I'm particularly proud of my fellow faculty--some of whom despise distance education even more than I do--for making a principled effort to provide the best quality education under frustrating circumstances.

And now we try to ready ourselves for more of the same this fall. Quoting Kurt Vonnegut, so it goes.