

Fuck Academic Rigor  
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“How are you inspiring greatness today?” asked the subject line of the email.

“Fuck you,” I muttered as I sent the message to Trash.

There are no words strong enough to convey how little I care right now about pedagogical greatness or, to use another term that triggers my gag reflex whenever I see it in a reply all message that lands uninvited in my inbox, “academic rigor.”

I hold two administrative posts and have spent the past month in my home office, at the computer, taking Zoom calls and writing up proposals, trying to make a brand new writing center and a largely defunded summer program work online during a pandemic. I care deeply about the work I do and the students I serve but, right now, work is, at least for me, mostly a distraction, albeit a rather interesting and remarkably time-consuming one.

I grew up in NYC. Almost everyone I know is there. A family friend died of COVID-19 there two weeks ago. His wife and son couldn't visit him in the hospital when he was alive. They couldn't mourn together after he died because the wife was sick and in quarantine herself. Half of my husband's family is sick there and the hospitals are so swamped that it takes a full day to get someone on the phone to give us an update.

Here in California, my husband is an essential worker in the medical field. He visits hospitals every day. I haven't been outside but for our balcony since mid-March. We rent an apartment here on which the lease ends in two weeks, a lease our management company has declined to renew. Since we cannot move during a pandemic and a shelter-in-place order, we are now consulting with an attorney to avoid eviction. This will cost us thousands of dollars and cause considerable stress.

We're two people. Though our jobs come with stress, we are still employed. Though a legal process will be difficult and potentially traumatizing, we can afford the lawyer.

My campus has a homeless student population of approximately ten percent. Most of our students receive financial aid and many are food insecure. Some students have lost their jobs. Some students are sick, while others are caring for sick parents and spouses. Some are taking care of their siblings while their parents work essential yet low-paying jobs. Some are suddenly homeschooling their own children. Some students have slow WiFi, others no WiFi. I teach graduate students, many of whom are themselves teachers, currently adjusting to new job requirements that come with many of the practical and pedagogical challenges I too face. But is now really the best time for me to say: “Let's theorize this new challenge we all face as teachers and write 750 words about it”?

The push for “rigor” is classist, racist, ableist, and either ignorant of or apathetic toward the challenges we and our students are facing.

If you reside on a mountaintop from which you believe you can look down and theorize “pandemic pedagogy,” I suggest you briefly turn your gaze around before you send that Call for Proposals about teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak or that advertisement for your new

online training about online instruction, from which you expect to collect online tuition. Consider what it is about the contexts in which you live and teach and your own positionality that affords you such distance on this situation.

Here's what I have to say about my pedagogy: I revised the course schedule for my students. I extended deadlines, added some discussion board posts, limited assignments. I do not require students meet with me or one another. I hold optional Zoom meetings at our previously scheduled class time to discuss readings. Sometimes two or three students show up, sometimes most of the class. I've explained that the readings and assignments remain on the syllabus because, if my students wish to become teachers or expand their repertoires as teachers, these materials might help, but I've also explained that they can submit as much or as little work as they feel they are able whenever they are able. Some of this is possible primarily because I have only eight students and because they are graduate students already passionate about their fields and juggling comparatively fewer classes than their undergraduate counterparts.

My experience, I know, does not align with what colleagues tell me about teaching First Year Composition right now. Many students have disappeared, have stopped submitting work, have ignored instructor emails, have dropped the class, or have withdrawn from school for the semester. Many of those who have stayed are sending panicked emails to their instructors about deadlines, assignments, insufficient technologies, health problems, or difficult family situations. Even if they are healthy and financially secure, they are confused, overwhelmed, and, too often, being held to unrealistic and inequitable expectations by instructors refusing to acknowledge the effects of this pandemic on students' lived realities and emotional well-being. Many teachers feel as helpless and worried as do their students.

This is not the time for "greatness." But it most definitely would be a *great* time for some people to think about the inequities they perpetuate as they encourage others, some of whom are not hyperbolically but literally sick or dying, to be great.

The main reason I'm holding optional Zoom chats and asking (and yes, I mean *asking*) anything of my students? Most of my students tell me that they, like many of us, are lonely. They miss talking to one another; they miss sitting in the classroom. One student said: "I miss hugs."

So fuck academic rigor. The only thing I care about as a teacher right now is showing compassion.

April 15, 2020

Keywords: *academic rigor; compassion; family; pandemic pedagogy; students.*