

# From pandemic to endemic pedagogy: Being CLEAR in our teaching

Peter Felten

Center for Engaged Learning, Elon University, Elon, North Carolina, USA

## Correspondence

Peter Felten, Center for Engaged Learning, Elon University, 2610 Campus Box, Elon, NC 27244, USA.  
Email: [pfelten@elon.edu](mailto:pfelten@elon.edu)

## Abstract

In this chapter, I consider what might happen if the pandemic acts as a portal for teaching and learning in higher education. I suggest the need to make commitments to five interlocking characteristics of post-pandemic pedagogy: Context, Learning, Equity, Agency, and Relationships. The future of teaching and learning, in short, is CLEAR.

Writing in April 2020, just as the first wave of Covid-19 crested across the world, the novelist Arundhati Roy suggested that the pandemic “is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.” Throughout history, Roy explained, pandemics force “humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew.” Acknowledging the trauma and pain of Covid-19, she described the pandemic as a perilous yet promising moment for individuals, communities, and the world: “We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it” (Roy, 2020).

In this article, I will consider what might happen if the pandemic acts as a portal for teaching and learning in higher education. I offer my thoughts here humbly and from my own position at a US private university, recognizing the wisdom of the Danish proverb: Prediction is difficult, especially about the future. As I write, the Delta variant still rages across the United States and around much of the world. What will be on the other side of this pandemic portal is not at all clear. Still, I find hope in Roy’s encouragement to imagine the world anew, walking lightly into the future – and fighting for a new vision of the possible.

Before speculating about that vision, however, I will make some observations about the recent history of teaching and learning in higher education, and then about what emerged as pandemic pedagogy in the face of the crises of 2020.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING BEFORE COVID

In 1995, Robert B. Barr and John Tagg identified a revolution underway:

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A paradigm shift is taking hold in American higher education. In its briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists *to provide instruction*. Subtly but profoundly, we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists *to produce learning*. This shift changes everything. (12, italics in original)

Documenting a paradigm shift is tricky but looking back nearly three decades Barr and Tagg (1995) certainly seem to have been onto something. Books like *How People Learn* (Bransford et al., 1999) made decades of cognitive science scholarship accessible to a wide range of faculty and staff in higher education, providing a scholarly foundation to institutional and faculty-driven inquiries into student learning being prompted by the nascent movements related to assessment and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Hutchings et al., 2011). Higher education scholars also published a trove of research demonstrating the effectiveness of active learning, student engagement, and high-impact educational practices (Freeman et al., 2014; Kuh, 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016). At the same time, many colleges and universities established or expanded faculty development centers to enhance teaching with the goal of deepening student learning and achieving more equitable student outcomes (Beach et al., 2016).

Despite the explosion of attention to learning and the significant improvements in teaching practices and curricular designs being made to support students, three problems keep the learning paradigm from being the norm in US higher education. First, instructor-centered teaching practices persist in many disciplines and institutions. For example, an observational study of more than 2,000 STEM class sessions at 25 North American universities found that “didactic” instruction, “in which 80% or more of class time consists of lecturing,” remains by far the most generic form of teaching in these contexts (Stains et al., 2018). Second, research on student learning suggests that too many students are “adrift” in higher education, learning little that lasts; this is possible because students often are not consistently challenged to do substantive academic work in college (Arum & Roksa, 2010). Third, deep inequities in student learning and outcomes persist – particularly related to race, ethnicity, and first-generation student status – in US higher education (Quaye et al., 2020) despite compelling evidence that active learning pedagogies and high-impact practices can narrow or eliminate achievement gaps (Finley & McNair, 2013; Theobald et al., 2020).

In the years since Barr and Tagg declared a “revolution,” the learning paradigm has gained considerable traction in US higher education. Yet through the 2010s, significant individual and institutional barriers made systematic change in teaching and learning seem to be unlikely – or even impossible – in many contexts (Brownell & Tanner, 2012). The disruptions of early 2020, including both the Covid-19 pandemic and then the murder of George Floyd, challenged both the paradigm and the view that higher education teaching could not change.

## PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a sudden disruption of higher education teaching and learning practices. In a matter of just a few days, most US colleges and universities switched from on-campus classes to fully online “remote instruction” (Marsicano et al., 2020). This pivot often was chaotic for all involved, requiring faculty to completely redesign courses overnight and students to develop whole new ways of going to college (Smith & Hornsby, 2021). In the chaos, a Facebook group called “Pandemic Pedagogy” mushroomed to more than 32,000 self-identified higher education faculty swapping tips and sharing reports of

their own experiences with the pandemonium (Schwartzman, 2020). A survey of more than 8000 US faculty from over 1300 colleges and universities found that their teaching priorities during that initial disrupted academic term focused on transitioning instructional content to remote environments, keeping students engaged, and providing additional supports to students (Fox et al., 2021). That attention to students mattered, and many faculty members made professional – and sometimes personal – sacrifices to support their students through the “pandemic pivot.”

Not surprisingly, the results of this frantic work were mixed, and the students with the fewest financial resources tended to suffer the most (Baum, 2020). Even for privileged students, a study of more than 4600 undergraduates at one flagship state university found what the authors called “a pandemic of busywork” as faculty struggled to switch in-person classes to often asynchronous formats; ironically, this research revealed that “students who spent more time and reported more effort carrying out this coursework generally had lower course performance and reported feeling less successful” (Motz et al., 2021). Indeed, many students struggled in this new learning environment, which one described as “you, your computer, and a ton of work. Have fun” (McMurtrie, 2021).

As the pandemic stretched beyond that first academic term, teaching and learning scholars and practitioners began to emphasize the differences between emergency remote teaching and high-quality online learning (Hodges et al., 2020) and the need for “resilient pedagogy” that “helps make your classes, assignments, and assessments as resistant to disruption as possible” (Eyler quoted in Gardiner, 2020). This often translated into a focus on quality over quantity – a “slimmed-down pandemic pedagogy” (Gooblar, 2021) – that involved, for instance, assigning less reading while helping students dive more deeply into what they read.

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020, after the initial pandemic-inflected term ended at most US colleges and universities, further challenged faculty and institutions, this time calling them to respond seriously and critically to systemic racism. Rapid changes to both pedagogy and curricula occurred in some places (Herron, 2020; Wood, 2021). Students often advocated for even more change in and beyond higher education (Thompson, 2021). Besides attention to practices and policies, George Floyd’s murder also traumatized many students, most especially Black students, exacerbating mental health problems that already had been magnified by the pandemic (Fowers & Wan, 2020).

This double trauma underscored the most important lesson from the first year of pandemic pedagogy: Learning and well-being are inextricably linked. Covid-19 caused widespread social distancing, economic anxiety, and health risks that aggravated isolation, loneliness, and stress that are common among undergraduates, and that are more pervasively and deeply experienced by students of color and low-income students – and George Floyd’s murder made all these worse (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020). Responding to these alarming conditions, the neuroscientist Mays Imad published the most read 2020 article in *Inside Higher Ed*, calling faculty to “radically reconceive how we teach” so that “at the very least, [we] ensure that we help our students feel safe, empowered and connected” in our courses. When students, particularly traumatized students, are not supported in their well-being, Imad explained, their capacity to learn and thrive plunges. To address well-being, faculty need to design and enact their pedagogy in ways that contribute to students: Feeling cognitively, emotionally, and physically safe; trusting faculty as teachers and as people who have students’ best-interests at heart; connecting with and supporting their peers in class; having some agency, voice, and choice within a course; and, sensing that they matter as whole, complex individuals (Imad, 2020).

## TOWARD ENDEMIC PEDAGOGY

In public health, a pandemic is a sudden, widespread viral outbreak. That same virus becomes endemic when the rate of disease “may continue to occur at this level indefinitely” so that the virus is sustained as a “constant presence” in a community ([Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, n.d.](#)). In fields beyond public health, “endemic” refers to something that is characteristic of and prevalent in a particular region, population, or environment; kangaroos, for instance, are endemic to Australia.

During the summer of 2020, Brad Wuetherick, a scholar now at the University of British Columbia, raised in private conversation with me the idea of a shift from pandemic to endemic pedagogy. What, he asked, should be “endemic” in higher education teaching and learning after the chaos of pandemic pedagogy and the traumas of Covid-19 and George Floyd’s murder?

As he begins to explore that question in his own work (for example, Wuetherick, 2021), I will borrow his turn of phrase – with permission – to outline a vision for what I imagine as the essential features of an endemic pedagogy in higher education that integrates scholarship, theory, and practices from before Covid-19 with the hard-earned lessons of 2020. My analysis is by-definition idiosyncratic, emerging from my own positionality, experiences, and understanding of the literature.

I see five defining characteristics of higher education teaching and learning in the future. Our endemic pedagogy must be rooted in our commitments to:

1. Context
2. Learning
3. Equity
4. Agency
5. Relationships

If the traumas of 2020 taught us nothing else, they revealed that higher education is *not* separate from the world. As I wrote elsewhere, “Even in disciplines and courses that seem to be above the fray, every student is immersed in a social, economic, and medical environment packed with urgent questions and wicked problems.... Covid-19 robbed us of our familiar classrooms, but it also plunged all of us into situations that provide rich, trans-disciplinary opportunities for critical analysis and integrative learning” (Felten, 2020). Rather than dreaming of returning to the mythical Ivory Tower where our classes and our students exist outside of the world, we should embrace the challenges – and the opportunities – afforded by teaching and learning in our own contexts, making room for “the cultural, political, economic, and ecological dynamics of the places” where we are learning and teaching (Gruenewald, 2003, 11). By attending not simply to what is being taught but also to where, when, with whom, and in what contexts teaching is happening, we will find new possibilities for learning, motivation, connection, and well-being.

The second defining characteristic might seem self-evident; of course, a commitment to student learning is central to effective teaching. However, too often faculty and institutions implicitly – or explicitly – assume that learning is the sole responsibility of students, ignoring the ways that their own pedagogies and their beliefs about students contribute to learning. Scholars have found, however, that instructors’ implicit theories of intelligence (for example, is a student’s capacity to learn fixed?) influence whether those instructors use the kinds of evidence-based active learning strategies that have been demonstrated to enhancing student learning, closing achievement gaps, and cultivating students’ sense of belonging (Aragón et al., 2018). Faculty need to commit to creating courses and experiences

that enable all students to learn and thrive. The results for students can be particularly significant when faculty work together to enhance learning across a multisection course or an entire academic program (McGowan et al., 2017).

Sustained, critical attention to equity is the third defining characteristic. Even as US undergraduate demographics are rapidly changing, significant gaps in student outcomes and experiences persist. Student attrition in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) majors, for example, is chronic (Estrada et al., 2016), and is significant among even high-performing undergraduates from historically marginalized groups (Chen, 2015). Research clearly outlines pedagogical practices that contribute to more equitable learning experiences and student outcomes (Dewsbury & Brame, 2019). However, individual change alone will not do. Institutions, and academic units within them, need to commit to systemic action to redress inequities (Bensimon, 2020). Changing hearts and minds is not enough, we also must rethink our pedagogies and policies to make learning, belonging, and attainment possible for every student in higher education.

By working toward more equitable pedagogies and experiences, we will be taking steps toward the fourth commitment: Enhancing student agency in teaching and learning. Education is most effective when it is done *with*, not *to* students. That means students must have some agency – some voice, some choice – in determining the processes and products of their learning. This does *not* require turning all pedagogical decision-making over to students but finding creative and practical ways for students to partner with faculty in at least some of what happens in a course and curriculum (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Research on such pedagogical partnerships demonstrates significant, consistent gains in learning and motivation when student perspectives help to inform pedagogical design (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). This approach to cultivating student agency also contributes to promoting equity and justice in student learning and experiences (De Bie et al., 2021).

This kind of student agency best develops in relationship-rich teaching and learning environments. Decades of research demonstrate the significance of student–faculty and student–student interactions for learning, motivation, and attainment (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Positive educational relationships are important for all undergraduates and are particularly salient for students of color and first-generation students (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Active learning pedagogies and high-impact practices – which have been shown to increase learning, close equity gaps, and support well-being – tend to center human interactions, providing students with individuals and groups to challenge and support them. Faculty do not need to build one-on-one relationships with every student to create powerful learning experiences; instead, well-designed courses and pedagogies make educationally purposeful interactions a core component of teaching and learning.

## THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IS CLEAR

Arundhati Roy (2020) challenged us to walk “lightly” through the pandemic portal, leaving behind the toxic and outdated baggage of the past. For higher education teaching and learning, I believe that means we need to make commitments to five interlocking characteristics of postpandemic pedagogy: Context, Learning, Equity, Agency, and Relationships. The future of teaching and learning, in short, is CLEAR.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Peter Felten** is executive director of the Center for Engaged Learning, assistant provost for teaching and learning, and professor of history at Elon University. He works with colleagues on institution-wide teaching and learning initiatives, and on the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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