

Crippling the COVID Classroom: Centering Students through Transformative Disability-Informed Instruction

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on how educators approach instruction, as this transition to online learning shifted the center of higher education classrooms. As two disabled educators, we parallel this to a transformative learning experience and invite faculty to embrace this as an opportunity to examine who is centered in our classes. Drawing on Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, we contend that the pandemic is itself a disorienting dilemma, or a situation whereby traditional models of education do not work. However, instead of starting from scratch, we suggest that educators look to people who have experience navigating similar academic barriers: disabled people. In outlining disability-informed instruction, we begin with power and autonomy, which are present in every class but have additional histories and meanings in disability studies. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) wrote about the importance of "pivoting the center" to empower learners, and although she was speaking in terms of race, the same need to be recognized exists for disabled students. More direct and meaningful engagement and reflection is possible by inviting students to utilize their own voices (Duyvis, n.d.) to process their experiences. Additionally, professors can reduce executive dysfunction by employing plain language in course communications and adding flexibility to incorporate both crip¹ time (Samuels, 2017) and dynamic disability (Benness, 2019). We offer both broad conceptual and practical solutions

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Before the pandemic, educators stood in front of our classes, explaining theory and describing method as students sat and watched our teaching happen. When the country quarantined in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, it all moved abruptly online. This led to a breakdown between teacher, material, and learner as we knew it. While this anomie, or loss of social norms, is new for many faculty, it is common for disabled students. As two disabled educators we assert that education itself that needs to change in order to create a more accommodating experience for all students. To adapt, we have to change who is centered, which requires premise reflection (Mezirow, 1991). First, we must acknowledge that a center exists. For many faculty, the pandemic was a disorienting dilemma that brought on the realization that if teaching does not center students, it disables them (Mezirow, 2009). In other words, the pandemic has functioned like a transformative learning experience for faculty to reflect on their practice (Cranton & King, 2003). The lesson, we suggest, is a "crippled [1]" classroom. To assist our transformative journey as educators in a pandemic, we offer a conceptual framework based on terms, concepts, and common practices derived from the disabled community. This essay is for faculty who were shocked into student-centered learning by the pandemic and are currently going through one of the stages of acceptance or reintegration (Mezirow, 1991). Our goal is to practice inclusive teaching that centers students in a changing teaching environment.

Many professors have limited first-hand experiences with disability and accommodation. We might receive a notice at the beginning of the semester with a list of conditions required for a particular

student, too often thinking of these as “special needs.” A medical condition can fundamentally disrupt a disabled student’s access to content delivery. Accommodations and inclusive learning are not small changes to help “special” students; they are the practice of creating equal access to all aspects of a course. We suggest that instead of trying to replicate an abled, physically constrained form of pedagogy, we should look to disability access and accommodation to transform our teaching so that all students can learn on their own terms. Florian (2011) defines inclusive pedagogy as “how to respect as well as respond to human differences in ways that include learners in, rather than exclude them from” (p. 814). An acknowledgement and respect of difference is what can lead to a reimagining of the center. Collins (1990) used the term, “pivot the center,” which we take to mean creating a teaching environment in which all students can be centered. Professors can do this by shifting perspectives and thinking about the enabling power of our instruction. Although studies in transformative learning have engaged with a learner-centered approach, “few, if any have explored in-depth what it looks like in practice” (Taylor, 2009, p. 14). Rather than centering in a way that is reactive, we recommend a reimagining of the relationship between learner and teacher. What follows is an introduction of important concepts in what we call disability-informed instruction, and how these practices can benefit all students. We also offer suggestions for how to incorporate these concepts into virtual classrooms.

Our theoretical framework is transformative learning (TL), defined by Mezirow (2009) as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (p. 22). There are two theoretical orientations of TL (Taylor, 2009). One is centered on the individual experience of the student. The other begins with individual transformation with the goal of extending outward to the transformation of society. In this essay we offer teaching practices that we hope will enable and empower students and faculty to create a more democratic society. This approach aligns with the social model of disability, which generally states that people are not inherently harmed by their impairments; rather, an ableist society disables people. This is important during the time of a deadly pandemic in which being human is a disability. We apply TL to teaching practices that center and enable students with the end goal of creating a society in which all people have more agency and autonomy.

Universal Design and Multi-Modal Learning

Universal design for learning (UDL) is a broad term that refers to a number of practices designed to make content equally accessible to all students by starting with the notion that every aspect of the class should be fully inclusive. In the rushed transition to online learning in spring of 2020, the disorienting dilemma stage of TL, accommodation was often ignored or minimized as panicked educators had to figure out how to turn their tried-and-tested face-to-face courses into online learning. For many, it likely felt like trying to make a square block fit into a round hole. In part, that is because accessibility looks different in face-to-face and online learning. The latter can actually be much more accommodating, but it requires investment on the part of the instructional designer. Traditional examples of employing UDL in class would be providing captions for any and all videos, structuring documents so that they are accessible to screen readers, and providing alt-text for images (Story, 2001). These are required accommodations for many disabled students, but they can also improve the education of abled students (Dell et al., 2015). For example, captions on videos can help ESL students, students who have to work in a noisy environment, or students who cannot use sound without creating a disruption.

UDL is relatively easy to put into practice. Most products contain accessibility checks for screen readers (including Microsoft Word, Google Docs, Microsoft PowerPoint, Canvas, and Blackboard). There are also accessibility programs that can check for issues and correct them, such as UDOIT. For alt-text, many of the programs mentioned above now prompt users to supply alt-text when inserting an image. Captions require more effort. Auto-generated captions are not sufficient to accommodate deaf, Deaf, and hard-of-hearing students. If you are the creator of a video, you will need to provide your own captions. Although, auto-generated captions through sites like YouTube can be a great way to give you a document you need only edit, instead of fully transcribe. This feature is also available in Panopto, Zoom, and

Google Meet. If you are recording an audio podcast, or you prefer to work off of a script, you can also provide students with that to make the content accessible. We would also recommend that if you use an outline or PowerPoint, and then record audio over it, you also provide the students with the original materials so students do not need to watch a whole video during an open-note exam or to study. Using alt-text and providing transcripts/captions can also aid teachers, as it clarifies why a particular image or section was included in a lecture. This reflective process can also benefit students, since it creates a stronger relationship between concepts and illustrations. Speaking from personal experience, it has also helped persuade us from using overly complex images and infographics that are not easily explainable as alt-text; if it is too complicated to explain in writing, it may be too much for students to digest.

Universal design is a starting point for accessibility in the classroom, but we urge faculty not to stop there. Broadly speaking, UDL is a reaction to specific disabilities rather than a reimagining of the learning environment so that it constantly “pivots the center.” To use the language of TL, we can view the spring of 2020 as an exposure to the perspective shift of crippling the classroom. Faculty can move deeper into perspective transformation and past the band-aid of UDL by asking themselves what role they have played in learning after moving teaching online. A step toward inclusive teaching is to understand the power dynamics that exist in the higher education classroom, as well as the instructor’s role in autonomous learning.

Autonomy and Centering the Student

Authority and power dynamics are key components of the classroom, as higher education is organized hierarchically. State boards mandate policies and general authority to the chancellor and provost, who pass them on to the deans, chairs, and faculty. This puts students at the bottom (Clabaugh, 2008). In addition to being legitimized by the institution, faculty also hold expert power (French & Raven, 1959). In other words, professors walk into class on the first day automatically centered. These asymmetric power dynamics do not foster a healthy environment for learning. A study by Smith, et al. (2008) found that students experiencing powerlessness exhibit reduced executive functioning. Executive functioning is responsible for planning and focusing, everything we want to happen in our classes. Furthermore, Mezirow’s (2009) sixth step of perspective transformation, “planning a course of action,” is less likely to occur if executive functioning is hindered by powerlessness (p. 19). This is important to TL educators because we know that an environment that enables TL is more likely to be metamorphic and lasting (Mezirow, 1991). Power dynamics are also central to disabilities education and advocacy, as many disabled people are denied autonomy and personhood both in and outside of the classroom (Mill et al., 2010; Vlachou & Papananou, 2015). Having control over one’s own actions is an innate need (Guinote, 2007) and should be prioritized as the ultimate goal of disability-informed instruction; to create a sense of empowerment within the student by enabling self-determination.

By designing learning opportunities that invite autonomy, we are creating a more democratic society. Trusting students to be in charge of their lives is particularly important when there are social injustices to right. Learning the autonomy required to take action to make positive change can be modeled in the higher education classroom. hooks (2017) said that democratic teachers “teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination” (p. 45). Online course design can help students be autonomous leaders in society. Redesigning classes to negotiate power with students is a step toward our transformation, our students’, and the future of our democratic society in which we see students as leaders making positive change. One way to do this, for instance, is to talk openly about where students have choice in the course and where they do not. As an example, one of us has adopted an “unessay” project in undergraduate courses (adapted from Denial, 2019). This assignment asks students to pitch what they would like to study and what method of delivery they prefer. This involves working one-on-one with students to develop a collaborative rubric where in addition to standard course requirements (use of academic literature, clarity of writing in the description of their project, and overall engagement), they suggest the criteria used to assess their learning. Though the instructor

maintains the overall ability to accept or reject their suggestions, it makes students stakeholders in their educational experiences, and increases the clarity of the assignment itself.

Reflecting on power and how it shows up in the higher education online classroom can help faculty “explor[e] options for new roles, relationships, and actions,” step five in Mezirow’s (2009, p. 19) steps of perspective transformation. For starters, the idea of empowered autonomy can be implemented in the virtual classroom by relinquishing some of our power to our students. Being constrained to one-sided lectures through computer monitors and cracked cell phone screens can lead to students feeling less autonomous than in classrooms where they react organically. Transformative, disability-informed instruction recognizes this and encourages a student-centered focus that allows learners to express their autonomy through selection of readings, flexibility in assignments, and self-goal-setting in class. This does not mean abandoning all lesson plans. Rather, providing options fosters independent engagement. Remote education is an invitation for educators to step aside and take the role of guide. We no longer need to expect all students to follow the same instruction, as we are all physically separate. It is in everyone’s interest to harness the independence that online learning initiates.

Ownvoices

Autonomy is closely related to the concept of “ownvoices” in disabled communities (Duyvis, n.d.; Whaley, n.d.). Disabled people want to describe our own experiences and own identities using our own voices. Historically speaking, we have been relegated to subjects in academic research (Stone & Priestley, 1996), discounted by medical practitioners (Werner & Malterud, 2003), and ignored in favor of parents’ experiences (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). In many ways this echoes the voices of all marginalized populations in academia—often spoken for, rarely allowed to speak for themselves.

As mentioned in the above section, fostering ownvoices can easily be accommodated in a virtual classroom. First, encouraging students to use experiential knowledge creates a stronger link between the student and content. This can be accomplished by designing content, readings, and assignments that allow learners to apply major course concepts to their own lives and experiences. The use of students’ own voices makes the content real. Second, providing bounded choices in content and assignments can create more authentic learning experiences. And third, constructing assignments that turn learners into teachers gives students an opportunity to apply the content. This could be through peer-learning communities or assignments designed to guide students to teach you material (related to the course) that is relevant to them. This motivates students to follow their passions. The unessay example discussed earlier is a great example of this concept.

This may be the most difficult aspect of crippling the classroom because educators are used to depending on our status as the ultimate authority, or the “sage on the stage.” Ceding authority to students may feel like a loss of something central to the role of educator, but the point is to de-center ourselves. In fact, if you are feeling uncomfortable with the ownvoices shift, we invite you to use this as an opportunity to reflect on the following questions:

- How is your perspective of your role as professor being challenged by this?
- What might a professor-centric perspective look like in this situation?
- What might a student-centric perspective look like?

Authentic, transformative, student-centered learning depends on an exchange between teacher and learner. Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) refer to this as a partnership, similar to a professional relationship that might exist outside of the classroom. Giving students more control of the course material can be beneficial to both parties. Much of the March teacher panic was around the question, “How do I lecture to students?” This remains the same throughout 2020, and likely 2021, as professors grapple with Zoom fatigue and the lack of student feedback. If we are honest, we know that the professor’s voice as the center of the virtual classroom should be the first thing to go. Our lecture content may be important, but the goal is to facilitate learning, not make students listen. Absent the shared physical space of the

classroom, the ritualized monologue becomes a hindrance to learning. Centering students leads to finding and using their own voices.

Plain Language

Just as we should consider the role our voices play in organizing the classroom, professors should consider how we communicate with students. Since most online interactions are asynchronous, we often lose the ability to clarify meaning, tone, and/or intent. This holds true for lecture content and assignment instructions. Using turns of phrase and literary flourishes may convey one's personality and help build relationships in the classroom; however, some neurodiverse conditions (such as autism) make it difficult to follow complex metaphors and jokes, understand presumptive leaps in logic, and self-start without explicit direction (Meltzer & Kramer, 2016; Hill, 2004). Plain language, or the use of accessible wording, is one way to accommodate varying levels of cognition, and was codified into federal documents with the Plain Writing Act of 2010 (Federal Plain Language Guidelines, 2011). This does not mean "dumbing down" content or writing at a 6th grade level for college courses, it simply means being mindful about how you communicate.

The Federal Plain Language Guidelines suggest several strategies for writing in plain language. The first step is to consider your audience and write at their level. Again, this does not mean talking down to students, who by definition have a lower level of education than the professor, or inserting seemingly culturally-relevant pop culture terms into our course materials. Instead, try to understand your audience and determine if they have the cultural tools to access your content. If not, then adapt your writing. Second, create a routine, easy to follow organization for all materials. Predictability is important when accommodating disability and is just as crucial when students are suffering from high cognitive loads and executive dysfunction pandemic learning. Good organization can also reduce "where can I find" emails. Third, choose your words carefully. In many cases, we need to use jargon and academic terms. That is okay. It is part of education. The key is to clearly and concisely explain terms that you feel the "average" college student would not already know. Fourth, be concise. As educators, we love learning and creating robust discussions. This may sound contradictory to point 3, but when moving content online, assess your lectures to see what is important and what is filler. Online attention spans are shorter than they are in the physical classroom (Geri et al., 2017), and content can usually be simplified. Likewise, when creating assignment instructions, make them easy to read and follow. Finally, it is acceptable to write in a conversational tone. Academia is not known for embracing informal dialogue, but writing like a human instead of a sentient textbook will help students translate our concepts into their words. It also aids in creating an inclusive environment where students feel like active participants.

These principles can be challenging for academics who are often deeply attached to content, but reimagining how we express ourselves and using plain language is vital for inclusive learning. If just thinking about reducing your content or simplifying your language feels uncomfortable, we invoke Mezirow's (2009) eighth step of perspective transformation, the "provisional trying of new roles" (p. 19). Try it twice to see how students respond. You can start with lectures by following the instructions above and exploring the PLAIN guide for additional notes about using the active voice, how to treat verbs, adapting to web users, and other useful tips. For assignments, use clear, concise language. Bullet-points and step-by-step instructions can help students approach an assignment in a more manageable fashion than if presented with a page long overview of the task. Encourage students to ask questions if they do not understand an assignment or require further explanation. Often when a student asks for clarification, what they mean is that the current explanation is inaccessible. Rather than repeating instructions or telling them to "figure it out," find a new way to convey the information. One simple way to do this is to ask a confused student to explain what *they* think the assignment requires them to do, and go from there. This will help with future assignments and, potentially, make you aware of an unknown source of confusion in the instructions.

(A)Synchronicity and Flexibility

Part of creating a fully accessible course is building in flexibility. Disability and chronic illness often disrupt regular activities, and flares can make predictability difficult. Disabled people often refer to this instability as “crip time” (Samuels, 2017). The term “dynamic disability” has also been used to describe the fluidity of impairment, which can increase or decrease in severity from one moment to the next (Benness, 2019). As a result, rigid attendance policies, late work restrictions, and the policing of behavior over virtual classrooms provide unnecessary barriers to disabled students. This is not to say that educators should forsake all due dates and class structure, turning online class into a correspondence course. Some students (and instructors) need structure right now. Instead, instruction informed by disability would support students by building flexibility into the syllabus. This would also benefit non-disabled students learning in a pandemic because none of us are at our best right now. It can be difficult to keep track of days, some students are engaged in educating their children or siblings while attending classes themselves, not everyone has equal access to the internet and computers, some are working whatever jobs are available to make ends meet, and the pandemic can have a real cost to physical and mental health. Designing courses with all of this in mind, along with the possibility that students could contract COVID-19 or have to quarantine, increases accessibility for all students because it acknowledges our collective anomie and allows for students to make class work with their unique schedules.

Adopting flexible practices can be difficult, particularly for faculty who have structures in place to help manage large classes. However, when we too rigidly adhere to our structures “we become nothing more than automatons following a dubious set of rules or principles” (Cranton & King, 2003, p. 32). Again, we invite you provisionally to try out more flexible practices at least twice. Then collect data from students to see if they were effective. In terms of how to accommodate crip time and the unpredictable nature of life in 2020/2021, this comes down to the personal preference of the professor. Synchronous lectures have obvious benefits over asynchronous lessons, but they are more difficult to accommodate. For one, most educators cannot provide real-time transcription, which makes this form of learning inherently exclusionary. It can be tempting to just tell disabled students to “not worry about it,” “do your best,” or “skip it” when the planned content is not accessible, but if even one student in your class is forced to have a completely different educational experience, then you have an inequitable classroom. If you can provide equal access to spoken material, then synchronous instruction still has accessibility issues. As mentioned above, disability is dynamic, not static, so requiring a physical presence does not account for illness flares. However, online education can be more flexible than face-to-face, so students can still attend class while in bed or in a dark room to help accommodate their needs. We strongly recommend against requiring cameras or policing student behavior in virtual classrooms. It is one thing to require certain behavior when class is conducted in a shared public space, but instructors have no right to require access to the private spaces of students. Synchronous classes can also be recorded and posted for students who cannot attend at a given time. This can be a form of built-in flexibility that can accommodate students, and give instructors time to create accurate captions (be sure to receive student permission before posting anyone’s likenesses). Another approach could be using asynchronous lecture with a synchronous lab or office hours format. This can create accessible content while providing a way for more interactive discussion.

As with lectures, there are many ways to create flexible assignments. One approach is to give students more time to turn in assignments, so they can choose to work on them during the days they feel most capable. A second approach would be to build in a number of dropped assignments. Students who complete all assignments can either skip those at the end of the semester, drop their lowest grades, or earn extra credit. This builds equity into the syllabus because all students have access to the same grade forgiveness policies. A similar approach would be to allow students to have a kind of “late pass” for a number of assignments. This maintains a consistent assignment schedule but allows for when life gets in the way of homework. Finally, the ideal method would be to allow students to select a number of assignments (and even readings) from a predetermined list. Adding choice to readings can be particularly effective when dealing with sensitive subjects. Anecdotally speaking, it is difficult to know what topics

can be distressing, and many students with PTSD or cPTSD may not have accommodations on file. This not only helps students operate autonomously towards their goals, but can benefit students who are dealing with the effects of past traumas, all without forcing them to disclose something they would rather not share with an instructor. As a note, trauma triggers and responses can be deeply personal, and difficult for someone else to predict, so we recommend taking this approach with all readings, and not just the subjects that an instructor feels would be most likely to cause distress. The challenge educators face during the pandemic is finding the balance between rigor and compassion. Allowing students to follow their passions and work on their terms can help achieve this.

Concluding Thoughts

Simply put, crippling the classroom is about noticing the center. To better accommodate our students, we need to be aware of who is being centered and prioritize the student experience over the educator's. Disability provides an insight into how to do this because disabled students, faculty, and instructional designers have had to navigate structures that were not built for us. That feeling of frustration and exhaustion that many educators are experiencing right now is similar to what it means to be a disabled person in an abled institution. We have an opportunity to cripp academia and create truly accessible content for disabled and non-disabled students experiencing a disruption in learning. We know this is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that our suggestions may not work for all instructors, all students, or at all institutions. Like many disabilities, the work of educators is often invisible, but our efforts can have long-lasting impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic, along with protests against racial injustice and economic instability have demanded change in every sector of society, including higher education. While it may seem unfair to ask an already strained occupation to transform its practices, we have chosen an occupation that is dynamic. Our job is, and always has been, to observe and adapt to the fluidity of learning. And pivoting the center means that the goal is constantly changing. The theoretical framework of TL is a useful tool to help educators track and understand the challenges of professional growth during this time. It is okay to still be struggling with some of these lessons. TL takes time and is not linear. Discomfort is a sign that it is working. We want to remind all pandemic educators to be kind and patient with yourselves. We are progressing toward becoming more inclusive and democratic educators.

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¹ “Crippling” is derived from the reclaimed ableist slur “crippled,” and should not be used by non-disabled persons. See Castrodale (2017) for a larger discourse on using critical disability studies into pedagogy.