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## Covid's 'New Normal:' Teaching Community Through Depression and Despair

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“Covid’s ‘New Normal:’ Teaching Community Through Depression and Despair”  
by Kelly Louise Opdycke

In Spring 2022, our campus began its first somewhat normal semester since the pandemic hit. As I looked around the classroom, I did not see faces of excitement. We spent some class time sharing our feelings about being back on campus. A few tried to stay positive, but many voiced negative opinions. Others allowed their empty seats to speak for them.

Most of us could name our feelings upon our return to campus, but we didn’t know what to do after giving them a name. hooks (2003) writes, “When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope” (p. xiv). With this quote, hooks considers the failure of critical scholarship to put theory into practice. In the instance of classrooms after COVID, the despair we feel exposes the lack of support within the academic system. This systemic failure has been impacting marginalized students for years, but the brutal nature of the pandemic made it obvious to everyone. In this article, I turn towards bell hooks’ *Teaching Community* to guide me in creating community amongst the despair we cannot let go of.

### **A Community In Despair**

The first despair-inducing failure exacerbated by COVID is the lack of holistic support for disabled students. When the pandemic saw education making space for different conceptualizations of a classroom, disabled students saw a glimpse of where accessibility could go. Upon return, I continued to support my disabled students through flexible deadlines and one-on-one meetings, but many shared this was not the case in many of their courses. In the rush back to normalcy, these students felt left behind, again.

The second despair-inducing failure is the way working class students were bolstered by the flexibility of courses, but then disappointed as campuses went closer to their pre-pandemic policies. As we began the spring semester, many students asked if the attendance policies would be lenient because they could not always get off of work to attend school. Some students requested the opportunity to Zoom in to classes. If my classrooms were equipped to do this, I said yes, but I didn’t always have the capability.

The third despair-inducing failure lies with belonging, especially of first-generation college students. Speaking from personal experience, a major part of a first-year generation college students’ success is figuring out the hidden curriculum, or the implicit rules, of academia. As some of them began to understand the hidden curriculum, the rug was pulled out from under them every new semester as faculty chose different pedagogical strategies. Many students

expressed anxiety, even on low-stake assignments. To combat some of this anxiety, I used class time for mental health days and daily check-ins. I also became more active about sharing my own ways of creating (or failing to create) boundaries and taking care of myself.

Many of my students fit into at least two of these despair-inducing categories, compounding their negative experiences. It is not surprising more students than usual got off track, or stopped submitting work completely. Like hooks (2003), I felt many students who drop out or fail “ha[d] no guides to teach them how to find their way in educational systems that” (p. 48) failed to support them. During the pandemic, they were overloaded with directions and rubrics without much space to resist and practice freedom. hooks invites educators to serve as guides of resistance. Unfortunately, sometimes the guides are navigating their own emotional overload.

### **Teaching Depressed**

When it came time to come to campus, my depression came over me. I entered the classroom forgetting strategies of in-class teaching. It felt awkward to be standing up, running to the computer to play a video, or using the whiteboard. The added weight of pressure from the despair of students made me feel like I had to be even more perfect than before. I needed to be the professor who helped them stay grounded in the classroom. They needed me to be on top of my profession to help them with this transition, and I just couldn't do it.

The shame I felt forced me deeper into depression. In *Teaching Community*, hooks (2003) discusses how strong communities of learners can allow students to come out of shame by “allow[ing] them to experience their vulnerability” among peers who “will dare to hold them up should they falter or fail” (p. 103). But what happens if the professors are the ones who need to come out of the shame they have experienced throughout their time in academia? The shame felt after receiving another journal rejection. The shame of not being tenured. Combine this with the shame of not being able to lead through moments of despair, it is probably not surprising that I am weighed down without any sense of direction.

This lack of direction became worse as the semester moved on. In particular, the close to empty classrooms were hard for me to wrestle with. In a class of 25 students, about half would show up. Sometimes, only five or six. It was demoralizing, and I began wondering why I was teaching in the first place.

“When teachers work to affirm the emotional well-being of students, we are doing the work of love,” writes hooks (2003, p. 133). The failure of my depressed teaching is not only my inability to fully affirm students' well-being, but, equally important, I do not know how to affirm my own well-being. I know

my well-being impacts how I interact with students. Unfortunately, when I'm depressed, I've found myself lost on the roadmap I had previously created. The ways I learned to care for myself are inaccessible to me. I dig myself into a deeper depression because I have failed to know myself well enough to prepare myself to serve my students.

### **Building Hope Within Despair and Depression**

For love to flourish, hooks believes we need to nurture emotional and academic growth of our students. In *All About Love*, hooks (2001) writes, "To successfully do the work of unlearning domination, a democratic educator has to cultivate a spirit of hopefulness about the capacity of individuals to change" (p. 73). While depressed, I forget my hopefulness. As I teach through depression, I have to pull myself back to hope.

I've found some strategies that help this happen. On the first day, my students and I create a code of care document, sharing how we plan to take care of ourselves, each other, and our community. Sometimes, to begin class, I invite students to share something that brings them joy despite the multiple stressors we're dealing with. Throughout the semester, we use activities to help us better understand how to use the current system for our benefit and how to make the changes we need to be able to exist. While these strategies are primarily for the students, they help me as well.

Still, I have my rough days. My students watch me waver between depression and hope. Through intentional care, love begins to form. Community blossoms.

### References

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