

## 2020: Trials, Tribulations and Teaching Moments

By Anna D Vaynman

I think it's fair to say that 2020 threw us all for a loop. To be slightly less elegant: it slapped us right across the face. I, for one, am still reeling. From one moment to the next each and every one of us was faced with impossible decisions and unimaginable stresses. The luxury of stability and predictability, the joy of family and friendship, the comfort of companionship – it simply vanished overnight. The illusion of control that any of us may have had dissipated, as we watched a virus consume the people we love, as we locked our doors and fought our instincts to shake hands, to hug, to share our space and our joys with others. Every generation alive struggled with its own fears; some were afraid of death, some afraid of losing their loved ones, some worried about losing their source of income, other attempting to manage childcare. People feeling completely alone and sad. Children expected to adapt to a completely new, unintuitive way of learning, teenagers isolated from the social structure that defined them. Frontline workers fighting the good fight. And teachers. Teachers expected to do the impossible.

As they redesigned their syllabi and thought creatively about how to educate students on a different platform, the world quietly started to think more carefully about what it is exactly we expect from our teachers and professors. Our educators.

On any given year, teachers are expected to share information in a digestible way, to make new ideas accessible to students, attempting to bring them one step closer to their ultimate vocational destination – wherever that may be. And treating students fairly and equally was a cornerstone of that education.

But if 2020 has taught us anything about teaching, it is that education is about so much more than a simple transmission of information. We are not teaching classrooms; we are teaching individuals. Individuals with their own struggles, their own fears, their own life circumstances that make their position in the world unlike anyone else's. Because despite the national experience of this pandemic, it was a completely personal and individual experience for each of us. The isolation of the experience made it particularly lonely.

I served as a Teacher's Assistant throughout the pandemic in a college in New York City. These months were challenging, eye-opening, frustrating, and heart-breaking. I want to say that they were also rewarding. But these months were filled with pain and fear and uncertainty, filled with attempts to provide hope in what seemed like a hopeless world. Our role as TA's suddenly morphed to encompass so much more than any other year: an unwritten expectation that we provide emotional support and strength, educational guidance, and answers to impossible questions. Questions with which we, too, were grappling.

It's a tricky position, that of a TA. What "side" are you on? The side of fairness, or the side of compassion? The side of accuracy, or the side of grace? Being "fair" – what does that mean in 2020? How do we maintain a balance that puts students' general wellbeing at the front and center of education – where it always should have been?

One student shared with me his lack of access to stable Wi-Fi, as he moved into a shelter after losing a job due to the pandemic. Another wrote of the losses she suffered in her immediate family, and her struggle to keep up with the academic workload as she made funeral arrangements and tried to cope, emotionally. A third shared her deep anxieties triggered by the social and political upheaval of our times, and her fear of entering a devastated workforce. Another – his challenges in using an online platform given his disabilities. Every student with his or her own life circumstance, each writing or calling to unload anguish, to seek guidance and comfort, to find reassurance. I was fortunate to work with professors who were extraordinarily kind and understanding, who worked with us to find creative solutions.

Time and time again I asked myself: how do we balance fairness with compassion? What is the role of the educators in our system?

I wish I could say that I found the answers. But I think 2020 made me realize that the answers did not matter as much as continually asking the questions mattered. Teaching is about people. It is about the future. It is about raising the next generation with wisdom and kindness, with empathy and patience and flexibility. This year highlighted that no two people experience the world in the same way, and that teaching can never be a one-size-fits-all encounter. It reminded us that in teaching, we are helping shape minds and hearts; not just through the material we share, perhaps not even primarily through the material we share, but by how we share it. How we interact with each other and with those over whom we have authority.

Perhaps if we continue to consistently ask ourselves these difficult questions about how we can show compassion without compromising the integrity of the classroom, we would be in a better place already. Perhaps fairness is not about treating all students the same, but about treating them fairly in relation to their own lives, in relation to their own challenges.

It may seem like an impossible dream. It may seem unrealistic, and I'm sure I'll be criticized for being naïve or idealistic or unreasonable. And perhaps it is a reach. But I hope that this year knocked a little bit of sense into our educational system, forcing institutions to put the welfare, safety, and physical and mental health of our youth at the forefront of education.

We are teaching students, not classrooms. We have an awesome responsibility towards the next generation, to show them the grace and the empathy that every person deserves. And I hope that we can internalize what we've learned about human suffering and human resilience, and reflect that awareness back into our classrooms – our classrooms filled with individual people who are looking to us for so much more than explanations of the textbook.