Pandemic Pedagogy: Practical and Empathetic Teaching Practices

EMILY BRIER

VIRGINIA TECH
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

This first-person dissection of pandemic pedagogy, supported by surveillance theory, queer and feminist pedagogical theory, and radically empathetic and nonviolent teaching practices, suggests a better way forward in college and university teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Outlining anti-surveillance and anti-policing practices, as well as instructors' roles as enforcers of the neoliberal university's interests and instructors' needs usurping best teaching and administrative practices, the article attempts to make sense of interconnected limitations and inequities in higher education which the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent distance and hybrid course delivery models have exposed. The article posits methods to reframe instructor/student interactions in virtual and socially distanced classrooms. In a radical departure from the violent surveillance university model, including an acknowledgement of processes instructors can realistically resist, the article suggests a non-hierarchical and informal ongoing review of teaching practices, a practiced and intentional refusal to engage with neoliberal systems of student control, and an active acknowledgement and decentering of instructors' feelings when making pedagogical decisions. An accompanying handout, originally presented at the 2020 unConference hosted by the Race, Space, Place Initiative at Virginia Commonwealth University, presents the information in an easy-to-read and dynamic format.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Emily Brier
Western Carolina University, US
ebrier@wcu.edu

"The pandemic didn't create these problems in education – they just made them more apparent." — Participant, unConference panel "Critical Pedagogy through Pandemic & Protest," hosted by the Race, Space, Place Initiative at Virginia Commonwealth University, November 20, 2020.

In March 2020, I moved five community college courses in composition and creative writing from seated, face-to-face format to distance learning, joining my one already-online composition course. Immediately, I recognized the COVID-19 pandemic was not the time to show off my distance learning acumen or expect a normal end to the semester from my students, many of whom were suddenly full-time caretakers for children, unemployed or employed in unsafe working conditions, and taking three to six online classes. In the ensuing weeks, I realized many colleagues fundamentally misunderstood the time in which we found ourselves. Emails from college administration walked faculty through requiring computer lockdown software for tests, colleagues opined about counting attendance for students who didn't turn on cameras for distance learning, and faculty expressed frustration at having to move their class online at a moment's notice, rather than being told *not to shove a seated course into an online box*. Spring 2020 taught us what not to do when a pandemic begins in the middle of the semester. However, teaching issues didn't lessen in the following months as emergency pandemic pedagogy solidified into ad hoc distance learning approaches. I began having conversations about structural shortcomings appearing during pandemic teaching, hoping to create space for conversations about better teaching both during the COVID-19 pandemic and after.

In this article and the accompanying handout first distributed as part of my presentation on the panel "Critical Pedagogy through Pandemic and Protest" at the 2020 unConference hosted by the Race, Space, Place Initiative at Virginia Commonwealth University, I argue instructors must address three main tenets of pandemic pedagogy. First, instructors must understand the risks and inequities that arise when using surveillance technology and tactics. Next, instructors must critically recalibrate their role in the neoliberal university, including their job as a "floor manager" in the factory model of higher education. Finally, instructors must recognize and decenter their feelings about hybrid and distance learning to interrupt harmful pedagogical choices. With these three central tenets, I believe we can begin having more productive conversations around "pandemic pedagogy" and all pedagogy. The accompanying handout works to present the information in this article in a more easily consumed and shareable format.

First, I will discuss the harms of surveillance technology and practices on college students, and how we can combat policing impulses in our teaching practice and course planning. Multiple students in the last year have publicly discussed the ills surveillance technology designed to recreate testing centers and classrooms in the home. Such software, like Respondus LockDown, requires that students give anonymous proctors full 360-degree views of rooms to ensure solitude and privacy. This practice becomes untenable for parents and caretakers of young children without available physical schools or childcare. These systems disadvantage students from poor and working-class backgrounds, as well as any other student for whom the risk of contracting COVID-19, the loss of work or pay, and a multitude of other issues has forced them into living and studying conditions which are crowded or create difficulty focusing. These technologies use algorithms and anonymous proctors to watch browsers and eye movements during exams, and were designed with ableist standards to track "normative" eye movements and body motions, discounting the many ways of being in one's body that don't constitute cheating.[1] Many instructors have begun to heed the call for disinvestment with these monitoring software companies, as well as less-invasive counterparts used in writing courses such as Turnitin, in a bid to protect student privacy and information in an increasingly interconnected and tenuous online learning climate.

However, even if instructors have foregone such invasive and ableist technology, they likely still use some surveillance and policing practices against their students. Many colleges and universities utilize categorization to track student academic progress. Before the semester begins, I can see which students are first-generation college students, veterans, "at-risk," and several other classifications. This system ostensibly helps faculty and staff identify students'

---

1   Here, "ableist" refers to discriminatory practices against disabled people. Mandating a certain physical ability to regulate eye movements or a standard of virtual eye contact is just one example of ableism. Pedagogically, instructors must work to interrupt ableist assumptions of physical and cognitive normativity in their physical and virtual classrooms.

varying needs; in reality, such markers stigmatize students and open the door for faculty discrimination before ever meeting our students. As Dylan Rodriguez notes (emphasis original), these "categories of social subjects ... are *apprehended and naturalized* by the school-as-state – gifted and talented, undocumented, gang affiliated, exceptional, at-risk, average – who are then, by ontological necessity, hierarchically separated through the protocols of pseudo-standardized intelligence quotient, socioeconomic class, race, gender, citizenship, sexuality, neighborhood, geography, etc."[2] Such classifications create hostility between students and faculty. Students are unsure how much faculty with whom they come into contact may already know or be able to find regarding their economic situation, educational history, and other personal details. Faculty can usually choose what to reveal or conceal; meanwhile, students' records of grades and attendance, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and conversations with advisors are often housed on student tracking software, such as AVISO, that faculty and staff can access at will. We must tell students exactly how the university classifies and tracks them, and how that data is used, if we are to build trust within this hyper-surveilled university.

Finally, instructors must resist the impulse, encouraged by administration, to escalate concerns unless the student presents an immediate danger to themselves or others, or the student discloses an issue that instructors are legally bound to report. Yanira Rodriguez posits a "pedagogy of refusal," arguing that instructors must refuse to buy into structural harms and violences schools insist we impose. In this framework, "[r]efusal helps us unmask seemingly benevolent relations and the function of affect in creating institutional buy-in. Our refusal creates space for resistance ... while simultaneously opening space for us to turn toward another possibility. Our refusal lets us recognize that we are each other's possibility."[3] Here, I argue that we must refuse, whenever possible, cross-university reporting. Helping a student make an appointment with a counseling center, or them accepting our offer to make a referral, creates a dynamic of working *with* the student in accessing mental health services, whereas reporting a student's mental unwellness without their knowledge enforces power imbalance. In these scenarios, I find it helpful to ask why the university wants me to file a report. The university's interests in continuing enrollment, retention numbers, and covering legal issues, such as enrollment funding mandates, demand that I report my students' grades, note absences, and create paper trails to advisors, counseling centers, and others to track their progress. Student benefits are secondary to this sprawling university business. A refusal of policing must occur within the classroom as well. Within the virtual classroom, such surveillance may include forcing students to turn on their cameras, showing their homes and nonnormative living situations therein. Instructors risk reinforcing racist and xenophobic fears and rhetoric in a post-9/11 and post-Columbine world in which all students deemed "other" are treated as potential threats to white students, white teachers, and America itself.[4] Refusing to police students can help us resist hyper-surveilled expectations from administration and begin to dismantle our automatic reaction to surveil and punish.

Next, I will explain instructors' role in the neoliberal university, and how we can recognize and dismantle our role as enforcers of the university's business interests. For my central metaphor regarding instructors and the neoliberal university to land, I should disclose that my father has worked on factory floors for over thirty years. So when I say instructors *are* the floor managers in the factory model of the neoliberal university, I believe wholeheartedly we can and should begin to identify our prescribed role in this system as *low-level managers*, enforcing norms, reporting behavior, and keeping "workers" in line. Additionally, I must define "neoliberal." Many people have already defined the term – see Whynacht, Arsenault, and Cooney's for notes on teaching abolitionist pedagogy within a neoliberal university,[5] and Chatterjee and Maira's

---

2   Dylan Rodriguez, "The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position," *Radical Teacher* 88, (2010): 9.

3   Yanira Rodriguez, "Pedagogies of Refusal: What It Means to (Un)teach a Student Like Me," *Radical Teacher* 115 (2019): 6, DOI: *10.5195/rt.2019.672*.

4   Tyson Lewis, "Critical Surveillance Literacy," *Critical Studies, Critical Methodologies* 6, no. 2 (2006): 264, *https://doi-org.proxy195.nclive.org/10.1177/1532708605279700*.

5   Ardath Whynacht, Emily Arsenault, and Rachael Cooney, "Abolitionist Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University: Notes on Trauma-Informed Practice, Collaboration, and Confronting the Impossible," *Social Justice* 45, no. 4 (2018): 141–162. *http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/abolitionist-pedagogy-neoliberal-university-notes/docview/2328350454/se-2?accountid=14968*.

book[6] for a fuller view of academia's deeply neoliberal investments in global colonialism. Here, I define neoliberalism as putting profits over people, often by placing a veneer of allegedly liberal values over conservative economic and social ideals. For instance, when a university holds an Earth Day event with speakers and tree planting alongside student organizations for environmental justice but has investments in the fossil fuel industry – that's neoliberalism. In my building, every faculty door sports a Safe Zone training sticker, sponsored by the university, but only the women's restrooms have free menstruation products, and the building has no single-user bathrooms. Again, neoliberalism uses liberal facades to disguise conservative economic policies.

So, how does an instructor fit into this neoliberal university? We make sure students ("workers") show up on time, appropriately dressed and prepared to perform the tasks we set forth during class. We also direct attention outside of the classroom, directing students' time, energy, and moods via course materials. Teaching literature, I have assigned texts which include racism, sexism, abortion, immigration rights, and suicide for my students to read, discuss, and write about. Even with content warnings, I still demand students engage with what I deem important in our brief time together. More insidiously, faculty often act as the first line of control against student activism and dissent and enforce adherence to university policy and norms to create a properly cowed and compliant future workforce. Teaching students to mask their truest selves and basic needs in university classrooms primes them to slide seamlessly into middle-class office jobs (or, if we look at job data for college-educated millennial and Gen-Z graduates, the service industry). Additionally, many universities, including mine, "…have responded to the demands of the prison-industrial complex for trained workers by proliferating new courses in corrections and law enforcement administration, from certificates and associate degrees for entry-level staff to masters programs…"[7] Thus, training students for compliance often trains them to re-enact these systems of punishment and control in prison systems and proto-prison systems after graduation. Obviously, Yanira Rodriguez's "pedagogy of refusal" must again come into play as an instructor at the neoliberal university.

However, we must recognize which systems of neoliberalism we can realistically reject, and which we must inconspicuously subvert to protect our livelihoods. In some senses, I police my students. I report accurate mid-term grades and instances of low attendance. I place notes for advisors about what students could do to improve "F" and "D" grades. In short, I play my part in controlling, monitoring, and reporting students, because I work on year-to-year contracts in a right-to-work state; because my spouse and I would struggle to live on one (small) income; and because, in short, I am not yet willing to call my university's bluff. In discussing my personal perspective, I hope to illuminate my point in a new way – just as there is no ethical consumption under late capitalism, so too is there no ethical pedagogy under the neoliberal university. We can subvert, yes. We can refuse as much as possible. But if my university system's investment portfolio includes fossil fuels, if I am chronically underpaid and overworked, if I am precariously employed and at the whims of faceless administrative budgetary meetings, I cannot fully reach my ethical pedagogical goals. However, I can notice weak points in this seemingly impassable neoliberal façade and resist accordingly.

Finally, I will discuss decentering instructors' feelings when crafting pandemic pedagogy and all pedagogy. Many decisions instructors make about their courses, from assignment design to everyday classroom interactions, protect instructors' feelings of comfort, acceptance, and interest. Not all these choices are negative, and some choices work to create safe spaces for faculty and students who are women, queer, and/or people of color; I am not debating, here, the creation or maintenance of safe or supportive classrooms. Instead, I hope to pinpoint feelings of loneliness, isolation, anxiety, and disconnectedness many instructors experienced during a sudden jolt to distance learning. The classroom in Fall 2020 was often not a site of engaged learning but rather an increasingly empty space as my students quarantined because of rising COVID-19 cases. Gone were the hallway conversations, faculty meetings, and get-togethers that normally would have ushered in my first semester at a new college. I felt I had

---

6   Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

7   Julia C. Oparah, "Challenging Complicity: The Neoliberal University and the Prison-Industrial Complex," In *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, ed. Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 111.

lost control of my teaching while facing mounting mandatory quarantine absences and little guidance from the university on how to effectively manage hybrid courses in such conditions. Even with all these challenges, I still argue that instructors must tend to their feelings *outside* the classroom and recognize their students may need different learning experiences during a pandemic. Demanding students turn on Zoom cameras disadvantages large portions of our students, as noted previously; likewise, asking students to respond to one another in disingenuous ways (such as requirements to respond to two peers per discussion board) creates engagement theatre, an illusion of classroom community. Recognizing what we normally get emotionally and socially from teaching, and what we don't get in a pandemic semester, can help us distinguish "good teaching" from "teaching that makes me feel good."

Instructors privileging their feelings can also lead to permissive or violent classrooms to which instructors ineffectively respond. Twigg discusses the "covering allyship" many professors, especially white women, perform in classrooms and scholarship, in which we work to appear "woke" without having the skillset or knowledge to confront racism or xenophobia in our work, ourselves, or our teaching. This "covering allyship" can look like creating a syllabus policy about inclusive language but being inept to address a student using a slur during class.[8] While Twigg focuses her article on race, such covering allyship also occurs regarding queerness and disability – a student may assume, based on a syllabus policy, accommodations in our course will be welcomed, only to be met with hostility about, say, PDFs inaccessible to screen readers. Likewise, an instructor with a Safe Zone link in their email signature may still use gendered language, stereotypes, and examples in their lectures and written materials, showing a lack of understanding of the allyship required to unpack internalized cis- and heteronormativity.[9] This "covering allyship" tricks students who expect us to, per our stated values, act as accomplices in their struggle against oppression. Students quickly discern when a professor's outward-pedagogy differs from their actual practice of teaching; Weiner notes, "When a teacher is progressive pedagogically but conservative/traditional in terms of assessment, there is an incoherence that tells students the teacher is not really as progressive as their pedagogy suggests."[10] Here, faculty must walk the walk: accept criticism of their policies, evaluate how their policies and practices misalign with their pedagogy, and readjust accordingly. Removing instructor feelings from this calculus helps us imagine and create better courses.

So, what next? I have outlined three key pillars of reconsidering pandemic pedagogy, and will close with a few actionable steps, and a disclaimer, for your teaching practice. First, because of intersecting privileges and biases, instructors often overlook how their own needs drive pedagogical choices. I suggest a non-hierarchical, unofficial review of your course and materials, such as having a conversation with a friend who teaches at another university; I have learned more about teaching by talking to other instructors than I did in graduate coursework. However, I had to push past my embarrassment at my lack of pedagogical knowledge, as well as my fear of judgement. As a white woman, my impulse toward "covering allyship" is strong, and takes constant scrutiny to unlearn this impulse to appear better than I perform. I worried more about *being found out* as a bad teacher than *being a bad teacher*, showing my emotional and professional ineptitude in the beginning of my career as an educator. My colleagues helped me consider different ways of considering our work, and for them, I am eternally grateful. Second, instructors should practice refusal in the face of the neoliberal university. Usually, when we discuss saying "no," we mean to new projects or obligations, hefted especially onto junior faculty and women. Here, I mean we must refuse to police our students in ways that create penalizing and hostile interactions. The neoliberal university gives us many tools for power and control, and we must refuse to pick them up whenever possible. Finally, instructors must take

8   Marnie Twigg, "Last Verses, Same as the First? On Racial Justice and 'Covering' Allyship in Compositionist Identities," *College Composition and Communication* 71, no. 1 (2019): 19.

9   Here, "cisnormativity" is defined as an expectation of societal cisgender norms. Cis, short for cisgender, is an adjective describing the gender of someone whose gender assigned at birth matches their gender identity. So, a cis woman was labeled a "girl" by doctors upon birth, and as an adult, identifies as a woman. Cisnormativity demands a normative performance of gender, including assumptions of dress, voice, name, pronouns, and behaviors. "Heteronormativity" describes compulsory and assumed heterosexuality, in which individuals and relationships are assumed to be heterosexual until proven otherwise.

10   Eric J. Weiner, "Sequestered Spaces, Public Places: The Responsibility of Intellectuals Who Teach Within the 'Safe Zones' of the Neoliberal University," *Taboo* 19, no. 2 (2020): 150, *http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/sequestered-spaces-public-places-responsibility/docview/2367752923/se-2?accountid=14968*.

stock of their biases, assumptions, and power to begin interrupting harmful systems. Avoiding white saviorism narratives and similar impulses should lie at the heart of especially white women's continued work. In order to interrupt these savior narratives, we must instead center what others would gain by revoking our covering allyship for a fuller, more honest practice as an always-evolving accomplice.

Instructor duality in the neoliberal university system can produce defensiveness during conversations of informed and empathetic pedagogy, bouts of which I have experienced at various points in my still-short teaching career. Most instructors are under-paid, overworked, and precariously employed. My own identities and positionality mean that I often feel in opposition to the university system. However, to my students I am just another long arm of the university administration, another teacher who has the power to traumatize, belittle, mock, and degrade students. Here, instructors must recognize such multiplicities are not contradictory, but rather, baked into the structure of the neoliberal university, meant to divide faculty, staff, and students, because should we come together in a unified voice to demand change, very little would stand in our way. Additionally, we must recognize what power we are not willing to give up. I take part in some systems of tracking and surveillance, such as grade and attendance reporting. Admitting as much, what *do* I resist? I resist hard due dates, punitive attendance policies, and discriminatory codes of conduct. I resist bringing mostly white and male authors into creative writing classes. I resist by using inclusive language, modeling this language, and correcting students when they use bigoted language. I resist as much as I can with the abilities that I have.

Finally, I want to end this discussion with a disclaimer and a moment of reflection. I first accessed this Carmen Kynard quote in Yanira Rodriguez's 2019 article "Pedagogies of Refusal: What it Means to (Un)teach a Student Like Me," and went to the writer's website for further context. Kynard writes in *Notes on Racial Realism:*

> It should be unconscionable to think that your little assignment or assessment strategy is offering a radically transformative end-game in this social system. That's academic marketing and a catering to white comfort. It's not anti-racism. Your pedagogy is not unshackling 400 years of Jim Crow lynch law, past or present, for any Black bodies that have hung from trees. And you are not breaking down today's prison walls and borders. So comfort and a feel of ease are not options. All that we have – when we think in terms of racial realism – is struggle. That's it. The hope is in the process of the struggle. It is in the constant work, not the end result or an eventual sign of progress because that is not forthcoming...not in the lifetime of anyone in this room. Being a racial realist changes the way you approach and politicize the work.[11]

Kynard argues our work does not immediately reach the lofty promises of so many books and talks about decolonizing the syllabus or classroom. Even as I attempt to interrupt racist, ableist, and classist university policies, I cannot untangle the racist, ableist, and classist structures that brought me to the front of the class, nor can I alleviate those discriminations from my students' lives outside of our classroom before, during, or after our semester together. White professors, like me, want a simple formula to eliminate racism in our classrooms and our pedagogies so we can get on with the work of teaching, but working toward a classroom that interrupts the violent realities in which it resides is, in fact, the work of teaching. Instead of growing frustrated that our pedagogy does not immediately fix the systemic ills of the university, we must acknowledge that, as Kynard says, "The hope is in the process of the struggle." Recognizing that our pedagogical choices won't undo the harm violent educational systems have already inflicted upon our students must come alongside a call to make these choices, anyway. No day-long seminar or single paper will fix our universities, but I hope this text, and the pandemic pedagogy handout which follows, can contribute to the ongoing conversation about creating classrooms of resistance, refusal, and empathy.

---

11   Carmen Kynard, "Notes on Racial Realism by One of the 'Problem People'," *Education, Liberation, & Black Radical Traditions for the 21st Century*, last modified October 19, 2017, *http://carmenkynard.org/notes-racial-realism-one-problem-people/*.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Emily Brier
Western Carolina University, US

REFERENCES

Chatterjee, Piya and Sunaina Maira. "Introduction: The Imperial University: Race, War, and the Nation State." In *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, 1–50. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816680894.003.0001*

Kynard, Carmen. "Notes on Racial Realism by One of the 'Problem People'." *Education, Liberation, & Black Radical Traditions for the 21ˢᵗ Century*. Last modified October 19, 2017. *http://carmenkynard.org/notes-racial-realism-one-problem-people/*.

Lewis, Tyson. "Critical Surveillance Literacy." *Critical Studies, Critical Methodologies* 6, no. 2 (2006): 263–281. *https://doi-org.proxy195.nclive.org/10.1177/1532708605279700*. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708605279700*

Oparah, Julia C. "Challenging Complicity: The Neoliberal University and the Prison-Industrial Complex." In *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, edited by Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, 99–119. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816680894.003.0004*

Rodriguez, Dylan. "The Disorientation of the Teaching Act: Abolition as Pedagogical Position." *Radical Teacher* 88 (2010): 7–19, 80. *http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/disorientation-teaching-act-abolition-as/docview/755429721/se-2?accountid=14968*. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/rdt.2010.0006*

Rodriguez, Yanira. "Pedagogies of Refusal: What It Means to (Un)teach a Student Like Me." *Radical Teacher* 115 (2019): 5–12,92–93. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5195/rt.2019.672*

Twigg, Marnie. "Last Verses, Same as the First? On Racial Justice and 'Covering' Allyship in Compositionist Identities." *College Composition and Communication* 71, no. 1 (2019): 7–30. *http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/last-verse-same-as-first-on-racial-justice/docview/2302393781/se-2?accountid=14968*.

Weiner, Eric J. "Sequestered Spaces, Public Places: The Responsibility of Intellectuals Who Teach Within the 'Safe Zones' of the Neoliberal University." *Taboo* 19, no. 2 (2020): 133–151. *http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/sequestered-spaces-public-places-responsibility/docview/2367752923/se-2?accountid=14968*.

Whynacht, Ardath, Emily Arsenault, and Rachael Cooney. "Abolitionist Pedagogy in the Neoliberal University: Notes on Trauma-Informed Practice, Collaboration, and Confronting the Impossible." *Social Justice* 45, no. 4 (2018): 141–162. *http://proxy195.nclive.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/abolitionist-pedagogy-neoliberal-university-notes/docview/2328350454/se-2?accountid=14968*.