

Mental Wellbeing during Teaching in the Time of Pandemic

Teaching during the pandemic has put my students' mental wellbeing forefront to my classroom goals. I have found myself struggling to balance space and time as my work and rest are confined to my home, and it's made me recognize that my students also struggle with prioritizing their tasks and their ability to actively learn in my remote classroom. This has shifted my paradigm on classroom policies.

At the beginning of the semester, I do an introductory activity for my students and myself to build a community and learn more about one another. One student discussed trying to balance work with raising her children alone because she wanted to become the first in her family to graduate from college to set an example for her children. For the first few assignments, she found herself behind and began emailing me for extensions. Pre-pandemic, I would have found myself firm in deadlines and unwavering on my stance to allow an extension. However, I sense, that for many students, they are concerned about the physical and financial health of themselves and their families and this causes them to lose sight of prioritizing their coursework.

I decided to offer this student an unconventional opportunity to succeed in my class. I told my student I would allow her a month to make up her missed work but only if she spent the next week submitting six daily assignments early. I told her that if she didn't get ahead and spent her time making up missed work, we would stay in this predicament all semester. She happily agreed to try. For the next week, she contacted me everyday and asked for help on questions. I had the opportunity to cheer her on and give her the confidence to complete the assignments. I told her that teachers do not want their students to fail, but that they want them all to succeed and graduate. I also told her that I had faith she could complete the assignments early. She ended the week with more than six early assignments completed and she became more vocal in our class times. I found that she helped motivate other student's privately or asked questions during class that other students wanted her to ask on their behalf. In short, she not only became successful in my class, but she became a leader.

I decided to offer this to all the student leniency on late work. My students expressed relief at the policy. I offered incentives to students that submitted all their work on time. I found students became more open earlier in the semester about any stress they felt to accomplish their work. We spend a portion of each class now discussing strategies to balance their schoolwork with work and personal life. More students participate in this dialogue and I have noticed this fosters a sense of tackling these trying times as a group. Furthermore, students feel less isolated from me and one another. I also find that students are more likely to communicate with me questions about their work outside the classroom. Once I offered this opportunity, I have had more one-on-one conferences with students to discuss their questions and pitfalls in completing an assignment. Once I have one call from a student in the classroom, that student becomes more vocal in classroom dialogue and usually volunteers how helpful the one-on-one conference was, leading to more students requesting this. By doing so, I see a higher success rate among my students and an increase in classroom participation. Caring and acknowledging that we all struggle with our mental health during these times allows for my students to become more resolved to stay in school and be successful.

We are evaluating essays for:

- Organization
- Strong style and personal voice
- Originality and clarity of content and ideas

How to use the rubric:

Please use this rubric as a measure of what we will be looking for when selecting winning essays. This rubric should provide guidelines, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You have probably encountered a rubric before, but here is a quick guide to using this one:

- Along the left side of the rubric grid are the criteria for evaluating essays.
- Along the top of the grid, we have scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).
- For each criterion, match the essay with the description that best fits it and assign a score in the rightmost column.
- Once you have scored the essay on all the criteria, add those five numbers. That is the score for the essay.

	4	3	2	1	Score
Focus on Topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but details are not clearly relevant or connected to the main idea.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more relevant evidence.	Main idea is <i>not</i> clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.	
Organization	Details are presented in a way that effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are presented in a way that sometimes makes the writing less interesting.	Details are presented in a manner that distracts the reader.	There is no clear structure to the paper.	
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original perspective on essay theme.	Writer takes a clear perspective on essay theme, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's perspective on essay theme is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to provide a clear perspective on essay theme, or writer contradicts himself.	
Quality of evidence/examples	Provides compelling and insightful evidence/examples that demonstrates the author's perspective.	Offers adequately compelling – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting evidence/examples.	Provides compelling but sometimes confusing evidence/examples to support writer's perspective.	Offers only general evidence/examples that are sometimes contradictory to the writer's perspective.	
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader.	
				TOTAL	

Adapted from Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay from LAEP.org and the 6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric from Readwritethink.org

