Loving Students in the Time of Covid: a Dispatch from LGBT Studies

GPat Patterson[*]

Kent State University, United States

Article Info

Abstract

Employing a trans/queer lens to instruction at a midwestern public university in the USA, this essay reflects on a pedagogical approach I developed for teaching during the pandemic. I argue that the pressure to adapt to COVID necessitates interrogating the status quo we're hustling to maintain as educators, including what agenda we're being asked to tend, and who is expendable in its upkeep. Specifically, the pandemic forced me to rethink the demands that are made of us as educators, and the demands that we, as educators, place on students in return. I rethink what about my LGBT Studies pedagogy stayed and what had to go—for the sake of both mine and my students' survival. Specifically, I call for emphasizing resiliency in marginalized communities; applying the course content to surprising (or unlikely) contexts; un-equating coverage with equality or quality; eliminating the penalty and punishment/never play, never joy paradigm from infecting pedagogy; motivating students' self-reflexive impulse to apply critical theory to their personal lives; and maintaining a grading system based on trust, self-care, and mutual respect. Using my redesigned classroom during the pandemic as an example, I hope to inspire readers to consider what is un/livable and un/lovable in their own pedagogical practice.

The pressure to adapt to COVID has forced teachers to take a closer look at the status quo we're hustling to maintain as educators, including what agenda we're being asked to tend, and who is expendable in its upkeep. In response to covid lockdowns, our institutions asked us to overhaul our face-to-face courses and take them online, in a span of a long weekend, with few resources. Teachers single-handedly saved their institutions from financial ruin. Then, when all of us were ready to cry and/or collapse from exhaustion, we were called upon to spend our unpaid summers developing flexible, remote coursework for the coming term— for students with a range of different learning styles, instructional needs, home lives, and technological access. We received a barrage of emails from administrators— in which we were heroes, in which we were family who'd get through this together, in which we were lazing about and not taking our jobs seriously, in which were told to plan for several different plans for the upcoming school year, in which some of us were laid off without warning, in which many of us were furloughed, in which many of us were told our personal safety mattered less than the institution's fiscal health, in which we were gaslit about legitimate concerns for our safety, in which we were told we'd have to raise course caps due to budget constraints, in which we were asked to take on additional university service to support our students while receiving few (if any) institutional supports ourselves, in which we were encouraged to attend such-and-such a brown bag session on how to maintain an active research agenda, in which we received condolences notifying us of yet another faculty member's sudden passing.

Teaching at a midwestern university in the USA, I watched my LGBT Studies students suffer the consequences of expendability in service of maintaining the status quo right alongside us. I think of my student who quit her job because her restauranter boss refused to follow basic health guidelines to keep his employees safe. I think of my student who lost their much-needed part-time job at an art supply box store because they contracted covid and were unable to come in for their scheduled hours. I think of another student whose father dropped dead on the warehouse floor, in the middle of a shift, as a result of covid complications. I think of a recently graduated trans student, now a social worker, whose supervisor put him on a shift with a coworker known to have covid— exposing him and his disabled partner to covid. I am reminded of the time when

I discovered that over half of the grad students enrolled in my summer course were high school teachers who, after sacrificing their own safety and emotional well-being to keep their districts afloat in the first few months of the pandemic, had been laid off by their districts and told they might find part-time work if they pursued graduate coursework. I recall the breakneck speed at which frontline workers went from heroes who deserved hazard pay to thankless layabouts who capitalized upon a work shortage to prey upon their employers. As a multiply marginalized queer and trans scholar, it is difficult for me not to understand these vignettes of despair within the framework of a white- abled-, and cishetero- supremacist neocropolitics, in which a web of institutional choices flag those deemed normative as worthy of protection and those deemed nonnormative as marked for death and abandonment (Mbembe, 2003; Puar, 2007; Snorton & Haritaworn, 2013).

Being confronted with my students' precarity as well as my own, in the face of outside pressures beyond our control, forced me to rethink the demands that are made of us as educators, and the demands that we, as educators, place on students in return. Teaching during this time forced me to rethink what about my LGBT Studies pedagogy stayed and what had to go—for the sake of both mine and my students' survival. While our disciplinary walks and our student populations may be different, I devote the latter portion of this essay to listing the things I am no longer willing to live with in my own teaching–– and I hope it'll inspire readers to consider what is un/livable and un/lovable in their own pedagogical practice.

Critical Theory or Clinical Depression?

"Dr. G, I understand why we're reading this, but it's so depressing." This is a comment I've been accustomed to hearing from my students. In the past, I've riffed off Foucault's explanation that the point of highlighting oppressive systems is to be able to locate the pressure points so that we know where to locate our efforts of resistance (Rabinow, 1991, p. 75). I'd follow that up with a quip about making sure to watch cute videos of otters holding hands (https://youtu.be/epUk3T2Kfno). To be fair to myself, I suppose I should also add that I have always tried, in my own way, to braid in fun activities when I taught face to face–– like identifying key concepts from the readings, giving my students chalk (or markers) and asking them to create a drawing, doodle, or chalk mural depicting

their major takeaways about the concept and then, in a mock studio critique, asking students to explain their drawing (and the concept) to their peers. This kind of activity not only acted like a pressure valve but it would also help students better engage with key concepts.

But when our courses switched to remote learning, I realized my go-to breather activities, so reliant on face to face instruction and a lack of social distancing, would no longer be viable. To wit, the pandemic brought into high relief the ways in which, even as someone who's lived with major depression for decades, I'd internalized an ableist walk-it-off approach to addressing student concerns about mental well-being (Price, 2011). While, certainly, scholars in my discipline have written about including trigger warnings in classroom materials and have emphasized the importance of dealing with heavy topics (Orem & Simpkins, 2015; Spender & Kulbaga, 2018), these pieces rarely address the cumulative effects (the emotional exhaustion) of reading and discussing difficult topics.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, I have developed two approaches to scaffolding course content that meaningfully address concerns around depressing reading material. The first approach involves emphasizing resiliency in marginalized communities. For example, the readings in my transgender studies course addressed common focal points of trans activism: job discrimination, precarious housing, medical discrimination, police brutality, prison abolition, etc. While students began every unit by reading academic articles discussing these topics, at the end of the unit, I provided a list of trans-led organizations and asked students to spend a day exploring the work they performed. This touchstone, which hinged upon the concept of trans mutual aid, emphasized to students that— in the face of discrimination and institutional abandonment— trans people came together to collectively increase their community members' access to life chances (Greene, 2021; Hwang, 2019; Spade, 2020).

The second approach involves taking a whimsical approach to course design, by applying the course content to surprising (or unlikely) contexts. For example, in my most recent LGBT Studies course, I developed course units around answering the question: *What does queer theory have to do with _____?* To fill in that blank, I sought ought academic articles (or book chapters) in which researchers use a queer lens to

examine a range of topics— from challenging fat phobia through queer-affirming coloring books (Pausé, 2017), examining queer dis/abled characters in scifi (Schalk, 2018), interrogating racism and hetero/sexism in Instagram accounts devoted to hiking (Stanley, 2020), to exploring queer of color feminist tarot readings (Harris, 2018). While students were still examining critical theory that dealt with overlapping forms of systemic oppression, the whimsical artifacts examined (coloring books, scifi, hiking, tarot, etc.) not only introduced a sense of wonder to course material but also encouraged students to be mindful of the ways critical theory can be applied to many contexts, beyond the usual suspects.

As a result of these course redesigns, I noticed that students lingered less on the depressing elements of the readings and instead mediated on themes of resilience, mutual aid, self-care, and queer joy. My only regret, of course, is that it took a global pandemic for me to substantively address students' concerns about heavy topics.

Does Coverage Equal Quality?

I'm not sure where we learn it (probably grad school), but there's this assumption that coverage equals quality. There are two ways concerns about "proper coverage" tend to surface: chronology and volume. The first of these sins of coverage centers around the assumption that providing students with a chronological view of a topic is always preferable. In this instance, theories and movements are explored in chronological order, which (depending on how that chronology is theorized) tends to emphasize the contributions of white cishetero men and gives short shrift to more diverse, contemporary theories and movements (Ahmed, 2017, p. 91).

This approach also tends to bore students and, if I may, instructors as well. For example, I'll never forget the time, as a graduate student, that I was approved to teach an Intro to LGBT Studies course with the program's default syllabus. The required textbook was this massive pink tome, and the readings took students through classic Greek texts on sexuality through to the invert, homophile, and gay liberation movements onward. While I mean no disrespect to historians, and while a focus on queer and trans histories can be important, I must say: such a rigid linear approach to LGBT Studies is perhaps the quickest method of turning away potential majors and minors. After that

unpleasant experience of feeling shoehorned into course scaffolding that seemed to stifle everyone involved, I have resisted the pressure to genuflect at the altar of chronology and, if I may, the textbook industry— favoring instead to organize my courses around pressing contemporary issues and highlight individual articles and book chapters by cutting-edge theorists.

I have, however, fallen prey to the second sin of coverage: making the assumption that my courses must be jam-packed with readings in order to demonstrate rigor. Early on, taking the advice of more experienced colleagues, in a two-day meeting schedule, I'd assign students to read two academic articles per class meeting— or three to four articles if the course met just once a week. In retrospect, I believe so much of this style of teaching is about academic posturing: proving to the people who read our syllabi in promotion, tenure, and reappointment files that we "know our stuff." But the fact of the matter is that this method has always been flawed; not only will many students not do the reading but, even if they did the reading, there's simply no time to devote equal time to each article during a given class session. To wit, by the end of the semester, both the instructor and the students are exhausted.

In recent years, I'd taken to the practice of assigning one article per session for a two-day schedule— or two articles for courses that met just once a week. And to facilitate student comprehension, I offered students both a clean, unmarked copy of the assigned article and an additional copy that included my notes and underlining. Without fail, students always chose the marked copy, explaining that my notes better helped them understand what they were reading but also walk away with the most important points.

In spite of these modifications, my assumptions about reasonable workload were once again challenged during the pandemic. Many universities have these rubrics that detail how many hours a week students should be expected to spend, outside of class, based on the credit hours of the course. To be clear, those models were always flawed, in that they make assumptions that our undergraduate students are taking classes full-time, are not expected to work, are not responsible for taking care of dependents, and are not themselves dealing with chronic illness and the stressors of systemic violence. For many students and instructors, even those for whom the usual

workflow seemed to fit, the pandemic brought into high relief what it means to teach and learn while saddled with new challenges, expectations, and forms of duress.

With that in mind, I finally gave myself permission to relinquish the idea that coverage means quality. In practice, that meant that I more than cut in half my previously reasonable homework load. For instance, in my sixteen-week queer theory course, students were assigned a total of twelve peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. While I initially felt guilty about pared down readings, I found that this practice made me mindful of the readings I felt were truly relevant to the course. And not only did students complete the reading but, because they knew there were fewer readings, they engaged with them much more closely— which improved the quality of class discussions and enabled students to apply concepts in the readings to other contexts. It also freed us up to engage with relevant secondary texts. Beyond that, overhauling my reading load made me realize how reliant my method of instruction had been on the discussion of primary texts. This shift away from a heavy reading load challenged me to supplement those readings by *creating learning experiences* for students, something I discuss more in the following section.

Is It a Routine or Is It a Rut?

In the summer after the pandemic, my university offered a paid month-long course, hosted by our university's center for teaching and learning, regarding best practices for remote instruction. While I assumed, going in, that most of what I wanted to learn about had to do with fancy educational technology (e.g. all the bells and whistles available in our learning management system), that didn't end up being my biggest takeaway from the course. What struck me most turned out to be a comment from a learning specialist, who asserted that assigning reading, only to discuss that reading during the next session— particularly in an online classroom, where the main venues for discussion were message boards and LMS breakout rooms— was monotonous, redundant, and (frankly) a waste of students' time.

As a person trained in the humanities, where discussing assigned reading is foundational to what we do in the classroom, I was aghast. *What else was there?*, I wondered. This was for me, a moment where I very nearly identified with the credulity

of flat-earther conspiracy theorists: such a suggestion felt akin to being asked to barrel forward off 'the edge' of the world. Even though I'd often pepper class discussions with supplementary activities, I'd still been operating under the assumption that the mainstay of my teaching should center on discussing assigned readings— and that there were relatively few ways of accomplishing that task. In contrast, this learning specialist claimed we should be providing a series of *learning experiences* for our students, where they had opportunities to apply what they'd learned from completing the homework. Dear reader, this concept queered my entire approach to pedagogy. To illustrate what creating learning experiences looks like, I discuss two examples from my LGBT Studies courses.

First, in my trans studies course, when I assigned an excerpt from Two Spirit scholar Driskill's (2016) *Asegi Stories*, I provided students with a list of discussion questions that pointed students toward key concepts in the reading. However, during the next class session, instead of plowing through a sad list of discussion questions, we began by viewing a brief video interview (https://youtu.be/GJA_MrjegKA), where Driskill (2015) talks about decolonizing trans studies. From there, I asked students to theorize through art in one of three ways: (1) rereading a passage where Driskill describes Cherokee gender cosmology and create a drawing that illustrated the concept, (2) locating a section from Driskill's writing they found particularly illuminating and, using the text as a wordbank, creating a found poem that reflected on themes from the work, or (3) interrogating the colonial framework of the male/female gender binary, which tends to portray gender as a spectrum between two poles, and theorizing and illustrating a cosmology that goes beyond a dualistic vision of gender. Students were expected to spend the majority of class time on this artwork which, at the end of the class session, they shared to their course Tumblr blogs— along with a 2-3 sentence reflection on how the exercise helped them meditate on the reading. During the next course meeting, students were expected to spend the entire session engaging with their peers' Tumblr blogs and commenting on their contributions.

In a variation on this method, in my queer theory course, I created a semester-long exercise where students collectively read, highlighted, commented, and replied to each other's comments on the assigned reading using Google Drive. Rather than organize each course unit around themes from the assigned reading, I designed my

course to feature an immersive experiences. So, for example, during a five-week unit that on queer Afrofuturism and queer of color feminism, students took a deep dive into Janelle Monáe's discography and videography, which tells the story of Cindy Mayweather, a Black pansexual cyborg who leads other subjugated droids in a mass uprising (Gipson, 2016). Class activities included: listening to Monáe's (2010) *The ArchAndroid* while creating erasure poems of Harraway's (1991) "Cyborg Manifesto," using the liner notes of Monáe's (2013) *The Electric Lady* album to create a collage reflecting on Taylor (2017)'s *How We Get Free*, watching Janelle Monáe: Dirty Computer (Acacio, 2018) together on Zoom and connecting the film's themes to Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984), and, finally, in a riff on Monáe's (n.d.) "Ten Droid Commandments,[1]" sharing with their peers I series of droid-theme selfies to document their "transformation".

Both of these classroom examples showcase a shift in pedagogical responsibility for instructor *and* student. For my own part, this shift required me to move from discussion facilitator to a curator of immersive learning experiences. For students, this shift required a rethinking of their role in the classroom—from someone expected to provide "correct" answers and polished, error-free products to, instead, an emerging intellectual, who draws from left and right hemispheres of the brain to theorize alongside their peers. On the whole, student response to this immersive model of learning was overwhelmingly positive. While it's difficult (and perhaps foolhardy) to interpret students' glowing course evaluations as evidence of pedagogical success, what stood out to me was a dramatic rise in student engagement, peer to peer interactions, and (perhaps most importantly) a self-reflexive impulse to apply critical theory to students' personal lives.

Are We Teaching or Are We Policing?

Of course, one notable reason student engagement and student enthusiasm increased in my pandemic classrooms had to do with a shift in priorities. Put simply, students put so much effort into these new classroom activities because engaging with the material was all they had to worry about. There was no exam. There was no research

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[1] Particularly the ninth commandment: "By show's end you must transform. This includes but is not limited to eye color, perspective, mood, or height."

paper. There was no group project. There was no high-stakes end-of-semester creative reflection. While this was not, to be clear, an explicit recommendation from my institution's professional development course on pandemic teaching, the course's focus on assessment did, nevertheless, inspire me to make this decision.

So how'd I get there? Well, dear reader, perhaps it was exhaustion. Perhaps it was delirium. But I couldn't help but to respond to one facilitator's call to action, when he asked: "Are your assessments *really* measuring students ability to demonstrate course outcomes— or are you creating assignments out of habit?" I won't lie. Of all the things I was asked to rethink about my teaching, this was perhaps the most welcome, because I'd always suspected the usual suspects of assessment— exams, research papers, group projects— didn't always align with purported course outcomes.

In the past, I'd try to queer these assessment expectations by having students generate the questions for their open-note midterm and final exams. Or, as an alternative to the dreaded end-of-term seminar paper, I'd ask students to create a substantive creative reflection on course themes, with a corresponding two-page reflection. But I'll be honest: a lot of students were so exhausted by the end of the semester that they phoned in those creative projects— and while students generating their own exam questions for an open-note final sure seemed radical, was regurgitating the correct answers *really* the best way to assess students' learning in an LGBT Studies course? Nope. It sure wasn't.

Needless to say, that well-received question about whether my assessments were truly in alignment with course outcomes had me asking questions like: Why are said assessments so often focused on providing a right answer or a polished product? Why do we assume longform research essays are the best way to demonstrate an engagement with course themes? Why do we rely so heavily on high-stakes assessments, when all of us have repeatedly been told that learning is an ongoing, recursive process, which often benefits from collaboration and experimentation? Why? Why, dear reader, do we torture ourselves by creating assessments that, no matter how we try and dress them up with whimsy, are ultimately a dreadful experience for us and our students? In short, friends, I arrived at the conclusion that so much of the way we teach hinges upon penalty and punishment— never play, never joy. Indeed, like Brown (2018), I believe

that a path toward liberation requires an intentional move to "create more room for joy, wholeness, and aliveness" not just in our lives but also in our pedagogies (Brown, 2018, p. 4).

As an educator with a heavy teaching load, the pandemic broke me in a lot of ways (most of them bad), but this was one thing I was actually glad to sweep into the dustbin. My grading contract with students was as radical as it was simple: Every day in class was a new opportunity for students to demonstrate what they were learning. If students brought their whole selves to that day's assigned activity, and clearly demonstrated that they were making genuine connections to assigned readings, they earned a point. If they phoned it in or skipped out, they'd lose a point (Patterson, 2020, 2021). Because I'd gone to lengths to create these immersive learning experiences for each day of course, I treated every course meeting as its own mini assignment. Students weren't asked to be correct, properly format source material, or create polished products; they were asked to engage in a variety of learning experiences and to do their best. So, essentially, in a sixteen-week two-day schedule, students could gain or lose a total of thirty-two points. To account for pandemic-related stressors (illness, depression, caretaking, etc.), I graded on a curve: if students could bring their whole selves to each class twenty-six times or more, they'd get an A— twenty-three times or more and they'd earn a B… and so on. I required no student to email me with excuses or divulge personal information to earn an excused absence.

Realizing that grading systems are punitive and, frankly, reinforce white cishetero supremacist ableist notions of meritocracy (Camangian, 2021; Dolmage, 2017; Inoue, 2019; McKinney, 2018), I resolved to create a grading system based on trust, self-care, and mutual respect— and to insist that no student who showed up to class would fail or earn a below average grade. Did the vast majority of my students earn A grades? Of course they did. But, if I may, that question misses the point. When I relinquished a punitive grade system—in which students are afraid to make mistakes, afraid to get it wrong, and afraid to be human beings with complex lives— it gave students permission to focus instead on actual learning. And they did learn, with enthusiasm!

I'm not sure when we all agreed to be concerned with "grade inflation." I'm not sure who thought to conflate assessment with currency but, quite far from its assertion to safeguard educational standards, such an ideology debases education as some kind of transaction. I am no stranger to a paradigm that associates intellectual rigor with hazing— but it didn't work for me, it didn't work for you, and it sure as heck doesn't work for our students. If this pandemic has taught us anything, I hope it has taught us to purge policing (in all its forms) from our pedagogies (LeMaster & Maps, 2020; LeMaster & Terminel, 2021). We are not cops. We are not bankers. We are not bosses. We are not drill sergeants. We are not beneficent dictators— or magnanimous rulers. And, quite frankly, the fact that so many of us have been encouraged to operate under such frameworks ought to give us pause.

Conclusion: Toward a Pedagogy of Grief (and Resilience)

One of the consequences of working in an increasingly neoliberal context has meant that whole areas of study in the humanities have been dismissed and/or defunded by the rhetorical question (never meant, really, to be answered): *But how will that help students get a job?* This, of course, assumes that the entire role of an education is to create a cadre of docile, homogenous workers to meet the demands of capital. What this pandemic has brought into high relief is something that multiply marginalized workers have always known: Capitalism never means for us to survive. In fact, we are meant to be disposable— the compost of ballooning and bursting markets, bolstered by governments (federal and local) which increasingly see their job less as representing the needs of community members so much as it is to facilitate the demands of "growth" (Hong, 2012; Khan, 2020; Wang, 2018). Ethics, in this context, would seem to demand that educators refuse to answer a question that essentially asks us to whittle down our disciplines into a series of brandable skillsets that encourage our students to view themselves as kindling.

I am, quite frankly, done answering the question of how a humanities education can help students get jobs. What I am increasingly interested in is asking how the humanities might help our students build (and sustain) a life worth living. What I am especially interested in is interrogating and replacing the neoliberal lenses, foisted upon

educators in the guise of "outcomes" and "best practices," which conflate rigor with academic hazing and learning with the ability to regurgitate (and/or perform) correctness. The fact of the matter is that our students have, well before this current pandemic arose, faced increasingly bleak socio-economic and ecological prospects. At where I teach in the USA, many of our students already have jobs, and the future jobs that await even the most talented of our students either do not exist or are so predatory that they're left to wonder why they worked so hard (and took on so much debt to earn an education) when so very little awaited them. It is immoral for educators to take on the role of gaslighting our students into preceding as if everything about the circumstances they face, during or after this pandemic, is normal.

What this moment requires is an acknowledgement that our students (and ourselves) are suffering and that, frankly, our students have been suffering, that they will likely continue to suffer (as, indeed, we all will), and that our pedagogies ought not to be insufferable. Indeed, this moment requires us to teach to and from a place of grief— of mourning, of exhaustion, of rage, of hopelessness, of all the goddamn emotions that emerge from human beings who are encouraged to sideline and silence very real aspects of their lives in the interest of performing "professionalism" and demonstrating "productivity." Indeed, without acknowledging this despair, this grief, and really sitting with the weight of what we're facing, I'm not sure it's possible to build a pedagogical approach that moves toward joy.

Enough. If this moment, in which many educators find themselves similarly exploited (Ahmed, 2012; Antwi, 2018; Gumbs, 2012; Maier et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2021), doesn't inspire us to begin asking different questions, then I don't know what will. We demoralize our students and ourselves when we submit to corporate edicts which, by design, view us as expendable. Educators must point students toward a life that is possible— and that is not only livable but one that is worth living. This, at minimum, calls upon us to confront that which is unlivable (and unsustainable) in our own pedagogies— for ourselves and for our students.

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