

Online, Open, and Equitable Education

Lessons from Teaching and Learning
during the Global Pandemic

*Edited by Nancy K. Turner, Nick Baker,
David J. Hornsby, Aline Germain-Rutherford,
David Graham, and Brad Wuetherick*

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
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CHAPTER 5

Teaching the Pandemic

Building an Online Community and Knowledge
through Multidisciplinary,
Compassion, and Conversation

Sofie Lachapelle, *Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada*

Elizabeth Finnis, *University of Guelph, Canada*

Colin DeMill, *University of Guelph, Canada*

T. Ryan Gregory, *University of Guelph, Canada*

In summer 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic was forcing faculty across Canada and the world to rethink their courses and content in the context of teaching remotely, we saw the opportunity to engage with students about the reality that we were all experiencing. We wanted to create and deliver a course that spoke to the many facets and multiple complexities of the moment we were all living through. What approaches could we use to engage with our academic community in a remote, online format, and how could we address the many questions that were continuing to emerge around COVID-19? We wanted to offer a course that would feel relevant, timely, unique, one that would take advantage of the possibilities and opportunities of an online format. In this chapter, we discuss the development and implementation of UNIV*2020, a multidisciplinary course designed to teach complex, big-issue topics through engagement with diverse expertise. Although our course was developed in, and as a response to, a time of specific crisis, we discuss how the model we developed can be adapted to any broad topic of relevance across disciplines (e.g., climate change; social justice; One Health, a transdisciplinary approach to optimal health outcomes) to create a community of academics, students, alumni,

and others committed to exploring it from multiple perspectives. And as we reflect on our experiences, we share a set of learnings that emerged for us while teaching this course during the pandemic and argue that this model offers significant potential to bring the university to the community and vice versa and opens possibilities for online, open, multidisciplinary education more broadly.

Our chapter adds to the emerging body of discussions and reflections on pedagogical approaches that facilitate a sense of connection, community, and engagement among students outside of typical face-to-face, classroom-based teaching in the context of the COVID-19 uncertainty and crisis (e.g., Auerbach and Longwe 2021; Baldock et al. 2021; Cheuk 2021; Huish 2021; Jacobs et al. 2021; Robertson et al. 2021). Our specific focus is rapidly creating an entirely new course, rather than adapting existing course materials or assignments. We first set the context for how we came to work together on this project. We then move to a discussion on the process of course development and follow with a discussion of the ways that community and compassion can be built in the online classroom. We finish with a list of key points to consider when developing a massive, multidisciplinary, online course aimed at diverse audiences and on a topic that can touch participants on a personal level.

Context

Creating a Space for Multidisciplinary Conversations About Pandemics

The idea of putting together a fully online, multidisciplinary, pandemics-focused course emerged from casual (online) conversations that some of us were having in early summer 2020. When the pandemic started, three of us were department chairs from different disciplinary backgrounds (Finnis: anthropology; Gregory: biology; Lachapelle: history) who, through shared administrative work, values, and interests, had found common ground and become friends. In spring and summer 2020, while faced with ongoing uncertainty around what COVID-19 would mean in terms of

teaching and other operational issues, we increasingly leaned on and supported each other.

It was through initial conversations in which we discussed day-to-day questions around teaching process, access to university spaces, how to ensure that faculty and students could continue to pursue research programs, and other logistical issues that we began to wonder about the possibility of creating a course that leveraged experts from across all areas of campus who could answer questions about COVID-19 and contextualize pandemics more broadly. What began as preliminary discussions resulted in the development of a learning community grounded in conversation, compassion, and care. In the process, it became one of the most rewarding teaching experiences of our careers and an amazing learning experience for all of us.

Methods

Summer and Fall 2020: Developing and Implementing UNIV*2020

Universities are bureaucratic in nature. Like everything else, new course development goes through multiple steps and various levels of approvals, which can take several months at times. This was time we did not have, and, given that there was no existing multidisciplinary course code that we could use to host our class, we had to create one. Through close collaboration with the office responsible for curriculum, we were able to rapidly move forward with the course proposal through the standard process so that UNIV*2020 Pandemics: Culture, Science, and Society was able to run for the first time in fall 2020.

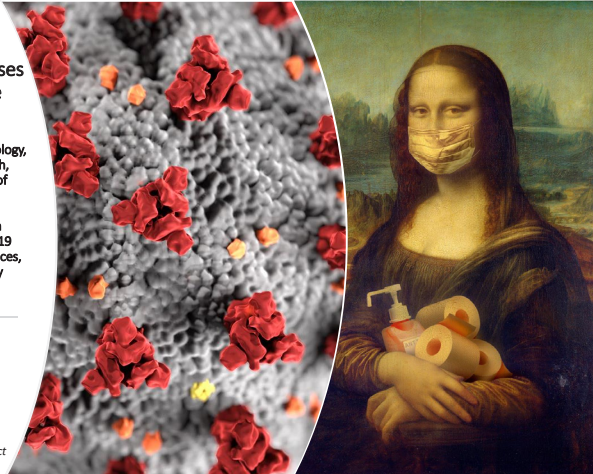
Open to students from all degree programs and majors beyond first year, the course was a collaboration between four colleges (Biological Sciences, Engineering and Physical Sciences, Arts, and Social and Applied Human Sciences) (see box 5.1, for fall 2020 course description). With just days between course approval and the opening of registration, we relied on and benefited from the efforts of program coordinators and advisors in helping to promote

the course to students across programs (see figure 5.1, promotional image). We mention curricular approval and course promotion here to highlight the importance of institutional support at numerous levels when attempting to rapidly create innovative curriculum that adapts to, engages with, and reflects on issues in real time.

Box 5.1. Pandemics: Culture, Science, and Society Course Description

We deliberately wrote the course title and description to be broad and flexible.

This course introduces students to interdisciplinary perspectives on the implications of pandemics, past and present. Drawing on expertise from across the university, the course is structured around a series of webinar panels and seminar discussions. Topics to be explored include pandemics in history, COVID-19 and ethics, COVID-19 and technology, knowledge, misinformation and discourse around pandemics, and the implications of COVID-19 on institutions, work, food, community, resilience.



What can infectious diseases tell us about the world we live in?

How can disciplines like psychology, biology, nutrition, literature, anthropology, math, music, and others help us make sense of pandemics?

Join us this Fall along with experts from across campus as we approach COVID-19 from the perspectives of the arts, sciences, and social sciences in a series of weekly interdisciplinary panels and interactive seminars.

Fall 2020

**UNIV*2020 Pandemics:
Culture, Science, and
Society**

Curious about this course? For more info, contact us at univ2020@uoguelph.ca.

Figure 5.1. Promotional image for fall 2020 offering

Each weekly class was organized around a two-hour panel discussion, typically featuring two to four faculty members or other invited experts. The exception to this model was week 1, where we hosted Dr. Amy Greer, who at the time was a Canada Research Chair in Population Disease Modelling at the University of Guelph. Dr. Greer's expertise set the stage for the rest of the course, grounding the students in biological and disease modelling aspects of COVID-19 and ensuring everyone had some baseline knowledge before proceeding. Panels were synchronous and live, and to maximize accessibility and flexibility for students, the panels were also recorded. However, weekly attendance was high, in large part, we believe, because of the engagement in the chat.

Organizing a course such as this one requires a good knowledge of the research expertise of the colleagues across the university or the ability to collaborate and be supported by someone or an office which has such information. In our case, developing the list of panelists and weekly themes for the fall 2020 offering was facilitated by our existing networks, particularly with other department chairs. Using these networks, we gathered information about potential faculty panelists, collecting a few key terms or sentences describing research expertise to help us create panel themes. Pulling together diverse expertise in multidisciplinary panels was a particularly creative part of the course development, and we agreed early on that the course should not be organized around disciplines and disciplinary approaches. Instead, our goal was to create panels where the weekly theme could be addressed from diverse perspectives. What could we learn, for example, when a computer scientist, a geographer, and a philosopher came together to discuss the intersections of COVID-19 and technologies? Or when two psychologists, a political scientist, and a historian discussed stigma, xenophobia, and infectious disease? And when two biologists and an anthropologist considered the intersections among infectious disease and animals, environments, and societies? Given that the pandemic was evolving as we were teaching it, we decided to leave the last two scheduled classes open so we could use them to respond to new or emerging

questions or topics of interest. We also invited everyone in the course to make suggestions for topics they would like explored in those final panels. This flexible approach to developing the panels proved successful, and we recommend this approach for these types of courses.

One of the many pleasant surprises we had while planning the course was the extraordinarily positive response among panelists. In both semesters, we approached potential panelists well in advance, outlining the goals of the course and proposing the theme of the panel in which they were being asked to participate. Nearly every prospective panelist accepted our invitation, typically quickly and enthusiastically, and ultimately, the course was made possible due to the generous participation of the many panelists who agreed to share their time and expertise. This enthusiasm carried over to the panels themselves, and we believe this was also critical to course success and for setting the tone of the community. Rather than solely exploring the more negative aspects of pandemics, panels provided insights into creativity and research. This energized, inspired, and encouraged us to continue offering the course in more than one semester (see below).

Given how readily both students and faculty members had signed on to the course, we decided to approach our university's office of alumni affairs and development with a proposal for alumni participation in the weekly panel sessions. The course was already conveniently scheduled in the evening, every Tuesday, from 7pm to 9pm. We decided to offer one hundred alumni spaces (to complement the two hundred spaces for students). In late August, a few weeks before the start of the semester, an invitation went out to alumni and the spaces filled within a few hours. Alumni joined us from all over Canada and around the world and they included graduates from all disciplines, from the late 1960s to 2019. Some were also present-day employees of the university. Alumni brought a perspective and an energy to the course that we had not anticipated, and this contributed to the success of the course and the feeling of one broad, remote, learning community coming together.

For students, the course was structured to allow for maximum flexibility and participation. The teaching team included two hosts (Gregory and Lachapelle), one course coordinator (Dr. Colin DeMill), and one teaching assistant (TA) per fifty students. The course coordinator managed the learning management system, student communication, and weekly meetings with TAs to ensure consistent grading. He also coordinated teaching in the TA-run seminars. The weekly seminars, consisting of a maximum of twenty-five students, provided students with the opportunity to discuss course content, share personal stories, and connect on a human level during a stressful time. Assessment in the course consisted of participation in seminar discussion (15%), weekly short written assignments (best 6 of 10, 10% each), and a final essay dealing with one or more of the issues explored in the panels and drawing on a multidisciplinary perspective (25%). The short written weekly assignments emerged from the weekly panels and focused on reflection. Students were given a choice of reflection questions, and one of the choices was often a creative assignment. See box 5.2 for question examples. These assignments allowed students to build their writing and critical analysis skills, while also engaging with creative and reflexive processes. In addition, this model made it easy to grant accommodations in response to students who were experiencing challenges.

Box 5.2. Sample Weekly Reflection Questions

- So far in this course we have heard from scientists, social scientists, and humanities experts on ways they are responding to and studying COVID-19. What are some of the differences that you notice in how experts from diverse disciplines think and talk about the pandemic? What are some of the common themes you are already beginning to see carry across panels and disciplines in this course?
- Submit a creative piece inspired by one or many of the themes in tonight's panel (One Health, sewage testing, the food web,

etc.). This can be a photo, a drawing, a public health poster, an infographic . . . and should be accompanied by a written response explaining the creative piece and how it engages with one or some of the specific themes of tonight's panel. (Note that the response accompanying the visual piece should be at least 300 words).

- Based on tonight's discussion, as well as the panels this semester and your own experience during the pandemic, provide a brief synopsis of a science fiction story (film, novel) that you would like to write about a post-COVID-19 world.

Approximately halfway through the fall 2020 semester, it became clear that there was considerable demand for the course to continue beyond a single semester, both because the format was proving to be such a success and because many topics remained to be explored as the pandemic continued to unfold. By this time, many COVID-19 research projects had been developed and initiated at the University of Guelph. We decided that for winter 2021, we would focus specifically on the COVID-19 scholarship that was being done across campus, under the theme "Creativity, Research, and Scholarship in a Time of Crisis." To develop this series of panels, we worked closely with the Vice President Research, Dr. Malcolm Campbell (an alumnus who has registered in each offering of the course), and drew from the list of projects that had been facilitated through the University of Guelph's COVID-19 Research Development and Catalyst Fund, which funded fifty-one research projects across all colleges, and the Creating in a Time of Coronavirus fund, which supported nine new creative projects.

The winter 2021 offering also included panels that explored individual and societal experiences of the pandemic, including perspectives from the Art Gallery of Guelph, the Guelph Civic Museum, and the Guelph Black Heritage Society. We continued with our multidisciplinary approach. For example, we brought together a sociologist, an economist, and a disabilities studies expert to explore how people were coping with COVID-19. We asked how people

were staying connected through the lens of research projects in music, history, and geography. We learned how researchers at the Art Gallery of Guelph, in landscape architecture, and in computer science were modelling and visualizing the COVID-19 pandemic and experience and making art more accessible using remote technology. Faculty in engineering, food science, and integrative biology shared their innovations in approaches to detecting COVID-19. We also included a more diverse set of voices in the second semester, inviting staff, post-doctoral fellows, and graduate students as panelists. We left the final week open to input from the class on the theme, and, as a result, we closed the course with a panel titled “COVID-19 and Accessibility—A Year at the University of Guelph” featuring staff, students, and alumni as panelists, each sharing their own experiences with accessibility in the course during the pandemic.

Given the clear interest from students and alumni in Fall 2020, we increased winter 2021 enrollment spaces to 400 students and 200 alumni. Again, spaces filled quickly, and although students were not able to take the course again, some alumni from fall 2020 joined us again for winter 2021. We kept the course as an evening offering to facilitate alumni engagement and accommodate panelists’ schedules. (The course also ran in fall 2021, this time under the theme “After the Pandemic?” with new panels and 400 students and 200 alumni. Although the lecture continued to be offered virtually, students were given the option to attend either online or in-person seminar sessions.)

Findings

Working to Create Community through Format and Approach

One of our goals for the course was to create an accessible, inclusive, and engaging environment in which to explore the experience of the pandemic in real time. To this end, the panel discussions had a conversational format and were built around a structured informality approach. The online classroom was a formal space with rules of conduct and expectations for how the chat was used but, at the same

time, the course hosts worked to create an open, personal tone by sharing their own curiosity and excitement about the material and the course approach. Working from home also helped to dissolve some traditional barriers between faculty and students, in that it offered insights into everyday life and spaces. In both fall 2020 and winter 2021, Sofie's vocal but adorable dog Cocoléo became the unofficial course mascot, with class participants asking (via chat) where he was if he did not appear in the first few minutes of each class. Sometimes panelists, hosts, and some students/alumni would stay for informal chats at the end of class, a kind of "after party" that typically reflected excitement about that night's discussion.

Weekly panels opened with a brief introduction from the two hosts, and then each panelist was asked to speak about the topic from their perspective for ten to fifteen minutes. With such a large audience, we decided not to allow class audio participation during the panel. Instead, both students and alumni were encouraged to use the chat function to ask questions. The hosts monitored the chat for questions during the panel presentations and used these questions as the basis for discussion. The chat was a fantastic tool that led to a greater degree of participation and engagement in the course than would have been possible in an in-person setting. Here again, while the comments were numerous and the course large, the hosts and panelists worked to create a personal tone by frequently speaking directly to specific comments in the chat.

Most of the scheduled class time was spent in wide-ranging and open discussion between the panelists and the hosts. Offering the chat alongside panels and discussions served not just as a way for students and alumni to ask questions, but also to relay their own experiences related to the weekly themes and to learn from each other (Cheuk 2021). For example, in a week about food security and food disruptions, we learned about the pressures that grocery store workers were experiencing, and the chat provided a way for the class to share their own experiences in grocery stores, as both employees and shoppers. And since the remote course meant people could join from long distances, chat comments offered insights into

how COVID-19 was being experienced in different parts of Canada and in different countries, contributing to the understanding of COVID-19 as a shared, global disruption (Huish 2021). In a face-to-face classroom, this long-distance engagement would not have been possible. Mandache, Browning, and Bletzer (2021, 57) have discussed how starting virtual classes with informal conversations create a “collective space for sharing personal experiences.” In our case, the classroom chat was this collective space, as were the small, TA-led class seminars.

Part of developing a welcoming, compassionate community was ensuring flexibility in how we responded to students and their needs. The course created a space where students sometimes shared the specifics of their personal struggles, related to COVID-19 and otherwise. This emerged in the panels through chat or in discussion, as panelists themselves were often open about some of their own pandemic struggles, and in the weekly small-group seminars. However, the sharing of struggles occurred with greater intensity in the weekly reflection assignments. Time and again, it was made clear that COVID-19 was affecting all of us in different and complicated ways. What could be a fun and light topic for some could carry a very different meaning to others. In some cases, topics highlighted mental health challenges that prompted us to reach out to students to ensure they had the right supports in place and to help them navigate the university’s mental wellness support system. And we learned from students about where we needed to exercise more sensitivity. While we took care to remind ourselves of the multiple experiences of the pandemic, we did not always succeed. For example, it was pointed out to us that the wording of a reflection question on how our relationships with food had changed during the pandemic was potentially triggering for students who struggled with eating disorders. That students felt comfortable sharing with us, and that we were able to receive this input and adapt to it, was another important benefit of our approach to the course, which made it clear that we were also learners. This encouraged collaboration and helped strengthen our community of learning.

Recommendations

How to Create a Multidisciplinary, Online, Flexible, and Engaging Course

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered educators the opportunity to reevaluate and take risks when it comes to pedagogical approaches, and to consider how the forced move to remote learning has led to approaches that can remain post-pandemic (Christian, McCarty, and Brown 2021; Huish 2021; Mandache, Browning, and Bletzer 2021; Robertson et al. 2021). When we first created the course, we were in a moment in time which will eventually pass, but the lessons we have learned from it can continue. And while we are still grappling with the pandemic, we see the potential for the ways the structure and approach of the course could be used to tackle other complex and pressing societal problems, while engaging with students, alumni, and the broader community. We therefore take lessons, at course and institutional levels, from our experiences.

At the course level, we are particularly struck by the power that online delivery can have in creating a caring learning community, and how bringing together alumni, students, and faculty under a common theme contributes to the successful development of such a community. Below are our recommendations to instructors who want to create large, multidisciplinary, engaging courses on “big picture” topics:

- Pick a topic that can be approached from many perspectives and allows for inclusivity and diversity.
 - Organize each panel around a theme that easily and interestingly crosses disciplines.
 - Draw from a wide range of expertise from across the institution and ensure panelists feel valued.
 - Make the course accessible to students from all years and programs and invite alumni participation.
 - Create a simple course format and structure that asks as little as possible from panelists. Focus on short initial presentations and a longer unrehearsed discussion with all panelists. When the panelists enjoy themselves and

learn from each other, it helps shape the course experience for everyone.

- Actively incorporate flexibility and compassion.
 - Build the course as an open, collaborative, respectful, and inclusive space for students and alumni to share their experiences and ask questions.
 - Be adaptable. A course exploring a real-time issue we are living through, and drawing on new and emerging knowledge, is an opportunity to stretch and challenge ourselves as educators (Mandache, Browning, and Bletzer 2021).
 - Build in flexibility for student assessments. Design assessments that engage students in different ways, including in terms of creative response options.
 - Foster a compassionate approach to the course and be responsive to feedback. Listen and follow through. If you feel you could have responded better, explore and learn from the experience.
 - Use a remote format, with an accessible time slot, and encourage the use of the chat function for discussion and community-building.
 - Design a course that is flexible in response to personnel or other changes. We were conscious of creating a course format that was not based on personalities or specific expertise. This proved useful when one of us (Lachapelle) had to be replaced as co-host for a fall 2021 offering.
- Create a tone that fosters enthusiasm and engagement.
 - Enjoy the course! It is critical for course designers to have genuine enthusiasm for the project and the topics. For us, this was not just extra work. It was energizing and exciting to develop and attend, and it showed.
 - Bring energy through a co-hosting approach. Co-hosts should represent more than one discipline so more

diverse questions get asked during panels. Dialogue and discussion are less static than presentation.

- Recognize (and welcome!) that in a course such as this we are all learners. Be curious and enthusiastic, engage speakers, and ask questions to keep the conversation going. Hosts should not be afraid to show their lack of familiarity with a specific topic.
- Appreciate that rapport between the co-hosts helps create and set the tone for the classroom and classroom participants. In our case, the online venue, and our homes (and pets!) brought about an informality that contributed to creating a welcoming and open community. Many students, alumni, and guest panelists shared some of their own personal experiences with the pandemic, and so did the co-hosts, bringing together academic knowledge and personal experience in ways that made the material more relatable to all.

Beyond the mechanics itself, a course such as this stands a far better chance of succeeding initially, and persisting in the longer term, if it is designed in a way that requires limited administrative support. Nevertheless, courses cannot run without at least some resourcing, particularly in terms of teaching assistant and instructional support. Being multidisciplinary and existing outside departmental structures can complicate this. As such, for these kinds of courses to succeed, funding, promotional, and other support from central administration is essential. At the University of Guelph, teaching assistant funds flow through institutional structures that prioritize disciplinary programs, and faculty teaching is typically allocated through programs and departments. We were fortunate to receive TA funds from deans who recognized the importance and creativity of our course, and this was facilitated through personal relationships and networks we had built as department chairs. However, these requests for resources had to be made for each semester, which affected our ability to plan for the longer term. We recommend that if institutions wish to support and maintain the

creation of innovative, real-time, multidisciplinary course structures that build community within and outside of the institution, it is important to (1) have transparent, straightforward, and easy mechanisms to allow faculty who may not have networks and connections to access supports quickly and effectively, and (2) provide longer-term resource support commitments.

Real-time, multidisciplinary grassroots initiatives such as this one must be supported at all levels of an institution. Our ability to rapidly develop and implement an entirely new course, as a response to crisis, has demonstrated potential for flexibility in institutional curricula design processes. However, the rapidity at which we were able to put this course together was facilitated by the fact that three of us were department chairs and had previous familiarity with the university's processes and structures. We knew who to ask and how to present our idea. This is not always the case. Enabling grassroots creativity must be a point of reflection and action at all levels of an institution, now perhaps more than ever.

Concluding Thoughts

Our experience with UNIV*2020 Pandemics: Culture, Science, and Society taught us so much about the possibilities that multidisciplinary and collaborative, online teaching can bring about to support equitable, accessible postsecondary education, something that was reflected in both the structure and the content of the course. For example, we strived to create flexibility for students in the course assessments. While flexibility was not entirely new for any of us, our COVID-19 experience reinforced the importance of this, and of considering the contexts that students may be embedded within during times of crisis or uncertainty. As instructors through different periods of COVID-19, we have learned lessons about ways to create engaging, rigorous assessments that are flexible and move away from some of the traditional methods of assessing knowledge. This course was part of that experience, and we carry those lessons into our future teaching, making this not just about reacting in times of crisis.

Allowing alumni to participate in the course showed us the possibilities associated with leveraging and further developing a university community beyond graduation. Not only did it remind us that alumni are looking for opportunities for “lifelong learning,” it also showed students that their relationship to academic knowledge and postsecondary institutions can and should continue beyond their degrees. The online format of the course also allowed alumni not located in Guelph to participate, allowing them to engage and contribute despite the distance, continuing their development as learners and helping to maintain their ties to the institution.

There is also something to be said about accessibility and equity when it comes to content. Students may feel that they are not able to understand material that is outside of their discipline; this may be particularly stark when it comes to the divide between the physical and biological sciences and the humanities. Offering a multidisciplinary course meant that students and alumni with diverse academic degrees could participate and engage with material that they might otherwise not encounter. The key was for panelists to pitch their talks to a wide audience, making knowledge accessible to a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it increasingly clear that responding to broad societal issues requires the engagement of all academic disciplines. It has also made clear the important societal role that universities play through research and education and the importance of bringing our collective contributions to scholarship to the community while being receptive to its needs. For us, developing and implementing UNIV*2020 has helped to reinforce the importance of bringing scholarship to the community and the need to create accessible, caring, and supportive communities of lifelong learners who learn and reflect on societal challenges together.

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