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Not Placeless, but Multiply Emplaced Trauma-Informed Relational Pedagogy in Online Education

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Abstract

This auto-ethnographic paper explores the author's process building anti-colonial anti-oppressive remote teaching practices in a social service worker diploma program at a downtown Toronto college. Differentiating between the crisis education implemented at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and intentional pedagogy designed for online spaces, the author demonstrates that remote teaching can inspire rebellious relationality and argues that the virtual classroom is not so much placeless as "multiply emplaced." The paper provides practical suggestions for building an online learning community and calls for an expansion of remote options guided by the principles of accessibility, relationality and trauma-informed practice.



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Editorial Note: This article mentions suicide and overdose.

Perspectives on Mental Health

It's week 13 of "Perspectives on Mental Health," a course in the Social Service Worker (SSW) program at the college in Toronto, Ontario where I teach. Today, we're talking about how to honor the self-determination and bodily autonomy of people experiencing suicidality. Or, more accurately, we're not talking – the virtual classroom is silent. All semester, students have worried about this discussion. I don't blame them; I've spent almost 20 years organizing for disability justice, and I still find these conversations challenging. Plus, it's 3pm on an overcast November day; it's no wonder they're quiet. I know they have opinions about the lecture – I've seen their discussion board posts. I also know they're here, even if they're mostly off camera – everyone has just shared a feeling word and re-affirmed their commitment to our group agreements.

I try several approaches to get the conversation going. Nothing works. At a loss, I drop the link to a shared document that lets students ask questions anonymously. Suddenly, there's a flurry of activity: "What is someone discloses they're suicidal and I get too triggered to help?"; "What can I do instead of calling 911?"; "What if someone I'm working with ...dies?" We engage this way for a while: me aloud, students in text. After about 10 minutes, I decide to "check the temperature" using a strategy adapted from anti-racist educator Andrateasha Fritzgerald (2021): "On a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 being 'this is too much' and 5 being 'I'm super engaged,' how are you right now?" A cascade of 3s. "What do you need to get to a 4?" A few students say they're getting up to drink water or stretch. Someone shares they're emotionally overwhelmed and unsure what to do. Another responds: "Remember that breathing exercise we did last week? Want me to lead it again?" A rush of thumbs-up emojis. We breathe together. Eventually, one person turns on their camera. Another opens their mic. The chat picks up. We talk.

As class ends, I ask what people did to stay present. One student says they were wrapped in a blanket all class. Another turned off the volume and followed along with the closed captions. Students affirm and validate each other's strategies. Several remark that if we had been in person, they would not have shown up at all: too close to their own experiences, too intense. Before we part ways, I ask them to honor what they've just done: collectively created a container to hold big feelings and work through challenging thoughts. They are already using SSW skills.

Trauma-Informed Relational Pedagogy in Online Education

I've been teaching "Perspectives on Mental Health" for nearly a decade. By 2020, I felt fairly confident that I knew how to co-create an environment safe enough for students to talk about difficult subjects and imagine a different world. It was this very confidence, in fact, that led me to refuse to run this course when we suddenly went online in spring 2020. Though I recognized the need for safety, I presumed the "pivot" to remote teaching was a cynical deployment of social crisis to *displace* educators from the embodied communities of our classrooms into the *placeless*, productivity-focused, isolating realm of the internet. Five years later, I insist on teaching this class online.

We are right to be wary of any pedagogical changes introduced by our institutions. In an increasingly technocratic culture, under deepening racial neoliberalism, academic administrators are pushing more and more dehumanizing “efficiencies”: standardized curricula, ballooning class sizes, and the forced use of so-called “Generative AI.” While diversity, equity, inclusion, and Indigenization (DEII) efforts in post-secondary have long been conditional and hamstrung (Ahmed, 2012, 2021), they now feel cruelly ironic: marketing departments fill recruitment material with images of “campus diversity” while aggressively undermining Indigenous pedagogies and laying off or pushing out Indigenous, Black, and racialized faculty and staff, especially those who vocally oppose occupation and genocide in Palestine, Sudan, Congo, and elsewhere (Ndiaye, 2025; Lennard, 2024; Raveendran, 2025; Schalk, 2025). In times like these, it is easy to confuse the online modality with the broader agenda of austerity, surveillance, and control.

After years of teaching remotely, however, I want to offer another perspective: not only is it possible to create genuine learning communities online – the modality opens up forms of rebellious relationality. In what follows, I narrate my transition from refusing remote teaching to advocating for it. I begin by situating myself as an educator, defining some key concepts, and sharing how I structured my classrooms before the pandemic. I spend the bulk of this reflection exploring my evolving teaching practice, sharing some strategies I believe may be applicable beyond the SSW classroom and college setting. I conclude as I began, with the wisdom of my students.

Limitations and Assumptions

I want to acknowledge some limitations of my perspective up front. First, my status as a full-time, tenured, unionized faculty member in a program not currently downsizing or facing closure gives me a freedom to experiment that the vast majority of post-secondary educators do not have. My teaching within the white supremacist, colonial, capitalist educational system is additionally shaped by my whiteness and settlerhood. Further, my experience is limited to online classes with a live component. Though I believe there is likely relevance to educators teaching fully asynchronously, I don’t feel confident to recommend something I haven’t tried.

Now that we are in a relationship of sorts, I also want to acknowledge the assumptions I have made about you, reader. I assume we both believe learning happens in community; that the mainstream educational system is shaped by Eurocentric ideologies that reify and center an atomized subject who is tacitly white, straight, cisgender, non-disabled, and class-privileged; that these ideologies are oppressive; that oppression injures or “traumatizes” the body/mind; and that trauma shuts down learning. I imagine that we endeavor to oppose oppression and make our classrooms as “life-sustaining and mind expanding” as possible, seeking to hold a space of what bell hooks (2003) would call “liberating mutuality” against the traumatizing norm (hooks, 2003, p. xv). If I’m right, I believe you may find something useful in my personal “experiments in implementing care” (Hubrig & currie, 2022, p. 136). Take what works, leave what doesn’t. As we move through permanent crisis, we need all the examples we can get.

Trauma-Informed Relational Pedagogy

Trauma-Informed Practice

Relationality begins with the self; to share what I've learned, I must start with where I "know from" (McKittrick and Mahtani, in Zuroski, 2020). As a child growing up in a chaotic environment, school was a refuge of predictability. Though I was identified as "different" by the system fairly early on, my sensitivity, worry, and intensity were narrated as "gifts", and I was streamed into advanced classes. This is very much a function of where I stand in systems of power: I am a white settler; I spent my early life in a dual-income household; I attended a private elementary school in Manhattan and a small, well-funded public high school in the NYC suburbs; both my parents are college graduates; and I was steeped in a culture where anxiety, hypervigilance, and even psychiatric pathologization were accepted if not normalized. In this way, despite (or because of) the colonial, white supremacist, capitalist, and ableist nature of the mainstream educational system, I did not experience school as a primary site of "wounding" (Olson, 2009).

I came to so-called Canada in my early 20s during a time when non-profits were hiring activists based on lived experience rather than credentials and followed several comrades into front-line community work. It was here that I first learned about trauma-informed practice, a paradigm the BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council (2013) articulates as "strengths-based and skill-building," a way of working alongside people caught in the system, with an "emphasis on safety and trustworthiness," and "opportunity for choice, collaboration, and connection" (pp. 12 – 13). Trauma informed practice asks that we treat all people "as if they might be trauma survivors" and provide resources that are "most likely to be growth promoting and least likely to be retraumatizing" (Elliott et al., 2005, p. 463 in Venet, 2021, p. 43). In the specific spaces where I worked – agencies with direct (if complicated) ties to grassroots movements for justice – trauma-informed practice additionally implied a critical orientation to the system itself and a mandate to work against the traumatizing role that "helping professionals" play in maintaining a violent status quo (Chapman & Withers, 2019). In this way, I came to see trauma-informed practice as part of larger project to dismantle the social work industrial complex and restore resources to community control.

When I moved into teaching, I discovered that many educators built their learning environments on similar principles. Teacher and scholar Alex Venet (2019), for example, frames trauma-informed education as a way of providing students with predictability, flexibility, connection, and empowerment while working "to dismantle the systems that harm our students and our community" both within and outside the classroom (Venet, 2019, para. 18). Per radical educator Remy Klein (2024), trauma-informed post-secondary practice:

1. Realizes the widespread prevalence of trauma in our students' lives;
2. Recognizes what the impacts of these experiences can look like in learners;
3. Responds by learning to teach in ways that account for these histories (and present realities) of harm; and
4. Works to avoid re-traumatizing learners by refusing to replicate conditions in our classrooms that resemble the original harm (slide 7).

When I say I try to teach from a trauma-informed perspective, this is what I mean.

Relationality as Responsibility to Treaty

Those of us aiming to work against colonial violence in higher education must determine “how to rightly relate” to our work, our students, and each other (Van Horn et al, 2021, p. 3 in Lees & Band, 2023, p. 5) within what Cajete (2015) calls the “industrial-technocratic-political complex” of the settler state (p. 16). Relationality – the idea that “all of us are reliant upon and thus responsible to the beings and the world in which we live” – has “a rich and varied theoretical history in a number of critical traditions” anchored in and “long preceded by Indigenous thought” (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020, p. 852). I am wary of pan-Indigenizing tendencies in settler scholarship and grateful to scholars Matt Wildcat (Cree) and Daniel Voth (Métis) (2023), who clarify that relationality is at once a set of “lessons on how we should order our societies” specific to each nation and an orientation shared by nearly all Indigenous peoples and cultures (p. 476).

Toronto is Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Wendat territory. I have been privileged to receive direction from Indigenous mentors in my life (including Sy'ilx Two Spirit scholar Dr. Percy Lezard and Cree health promoter Les Harper) to look to two treaties – the Gaswéñdah/Two Row Wampum, which is grounded in Haudenosaunee governance, and the Dish with One Spoon, emerging from both Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe thought – for instructions on right relationality on this stolen land. Both are based in what Michi Saagiig Nishaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2008) calls “the common Indigenous ethics of justice, peace, respect, reciprocity and accountability” (p. 29). While I cannot provide teachings on or invite others into these treaties, I want to briefly share my evolving understanding of them as they relate to my practice.

The principles of the Two Row Wampum were first articulated in a 1600s agreement between the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Dutch that forms the foundation of all treaties the Haudenosaunee made with subsequent colonizers. The Two Row Wampum uses the metaphor of the European boat and the Haudenosaunee canoe to illustrate the imperative that settlers honor Indigenous self-determination and never interfere with Indigenous lifeways. Tuscarora Elder Rick Hill (2018) quotes Chief William Jacobs of the Grand River Territory in 1862 as follows:

You [Canada] sail your own Boat and we'll paddle our own canoe Side by Side. I was not to enter in your craft and you was not to enter in my canoe. Gale and calm we must be side by side...we will always keep our laws separate from your laws (in Hill & Coleman, 2018, p. 343).

A key value of the Two Row is non-interference, which Mohawk scholar and psychiatrist Clare Brant (1982) describes as “[One of] the most universal ethics” (para. 8) in Haudenosaunee thought. While the Two Row stresses a nation-to-nation relationship, the principle of non-interference also infuses community-to-community, and person-to-person interactions. This treaty applies “as long as the sun shall shine, the grass shall grow and the rivers shall flow” (Ganienekeh Territory Council Fire, n.d., para. 5). Those of us living on Haudenosaunee land are responsible to it in perpetuity.

The Dish with Spoon is one of several agreements “that commemorate the relationship between the Anishinabek and Haudenosaunee Confederacy” (Loft et al, 2022, para.1). Rooted in principles that have organized Indigenous life on this land since time immemorial, this treaty guides Haudenosaunee and Nishaabeg peoples to conceptualize their shared territory as a single dish from which to draw sustenance. There is only one spoon, which means there must constant

negotiation in the spirit of “harmony and interconnection” (Simpson, 2008, p. 37). According to Grandmother’s Voice (2023), The Dish with One Spoon teaching “transcends cultural boundaries and speaks to the shared responsibility of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike” (para. 5). Like the Two Row Wampum, this agreement is permanent, requiring “regular renewal” (Simpson, 2008, p. 37).

My Pre-Pandemic Classroom

By 2020, I had developed strategies that aspired towards trauma-informed practice and right relationality. I started each semester engaging with Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholarship on treaty and set group agreements in conversation with the principles of self-determination and interdependence. I checked in about students’ access needs, kept directions to the gender-neutral and accessible washrooms on the board, and provided nametags with a space to include pronouns. On a recommendation from my colleague Melissa Teles, I brought a collection of sensory stimulation objects like coloring books to the classroom and invited people to self-soothe and/or take breaks when needed. Following my mentor Min Kaur, I dedicated time at the top of the class for students to share relevant protests, demonstrations, community events and mutual aid initiatives, and asked them to bring personal reflections on how to live their responsibilities to treaty for us to work through together.

I am generally loath to use student evaluations of teaching (SETs) to measure how well I create and hold learning space. SETs are notoriously biased; race, gender, disability, native language, and educational level all dramatically affect the overall positivity or negativity of these reports, with the “highest scores” regularly awarded to “white English first language speaking, able-bodied, male academics who are neither too young nor too old (approx. 35 – 50 years of age), and who the students believe are heterosexual” (Heffernan, 2021, p. 5). Though I am a visibly queer non-binary person, my whiteness, settlerhood, educational status, and age put me in a privileged position. With all that in mind, it is worth noting that before 2020, every evaluation contained references to the positive felt experience of the classroom *as a physical place*.

The Great Pivot

Accounts of the educational system in the early pandemic are riven with contradictions. The modality shift created new access and empowerment for some multiply marginalized students (Doak, 2022; Mowreader, 2024; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022; Pressley, 2022) and profoundly increased barriers discrimination for others with the same identities and/or surviving the same structures of power (Brockbank & Hall, 2023; Golden et al, 2023; Ikebuchi, 2023). Rates of suicide among students, particularly teenagers, declined (Herken, 2021; Morrison, 2022) while emotional and psychological distress grew (Nuryana et al, 2023; Wang & Xu, 2023). Some researchers attribute the deepened inequities in particular to the shift to online learning; it is important to remember, however, that this was crisis education, not planned pedagogy. Institutions went online unevenly, for varied periods of time, and with little infrastructure to support adaptation. More importantly, the sudden format change was prompted by a global pandemic which saw many underpaid service jobs reclassified as “essential,” increasing risk but not compensation; the closure or restriction of vital resources; the expansion of the criminal punishment system; and mass sickness, disability and death due to COVID, the toxic drug supply, medical neglect, and state violence. As the pandemic enters its seventh year, these factors continue to disproportionately

impact already-oppressed communities (CBC News, 2025; COVID-19 Immunity Task Force, 2022; Elmi & Yusuf, 2026; Gillmore, 2026; Pelley, 2022; Xiang et al, 2025). It's simply impossible to fully separate the "pivot" from all other social conditions.

I do not want to downplay the pain, uncertainty, confusion, damage, and death in the first year of COVID; however, amidst the chaos there were some necessary ruptures in "business as usual." This was particularly true in post-secondary. As Suzanne Smythe (2022) writes, "Amidst the crisis was the sense that a profound pedagogical transformation was underway, not only because educators and learners were using technologies in new ways, but because usual relations of power were shifting" (p. 51). Educators "had no choice but to be transformative learners" ourselves (Marquart and Baez, 2021, p. 64). This changed the experience of education for students and teachers alike.

In his book *Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire*, Gregory Cajete (2015) thinks alongside settler scholars Charles and Samples (2004), who articulate "community" as a space of "belonging...commitment and participation" within "reciprocal and symbiotic relationships" (Charles & Samples, 2004, in Cajete 2015, pp. 79 – 80). While he asserts that we must orient to the land in our community-building practice, Cajete (2015) reminds us that "communities are not only physical entities but can also be communities of mind, spirit, and consciousness" drawn together via "modern technologies." "Our challenge," he writes, "is to creatively apply this wisdom [of reciprocal relations and land-based consciousness] to present communities and those of the future" (p. 93). The sudden pivot of modalities gave us all the chance to take up that challenge.

Lessons from Remote Teaching

Rethinking Space

The built environment of the post-secondary campus functions to lock out, silence, and shame many structurally oppressed students, especially those who are disabled/ neurodivergent/ Mad, poor, un/precariously housed, fat, trans and/or gender non-conforming, and Black, Indigenous and/or otherwise racialized (Cameron et al, 2024; Henry, 2016; Hyslop, 2021; Laidlaw, 2020; Nadworny, 2019; Sotomayor et al, 2022; Tomlinson et al, 2021; Wertans & Burch, 2022; Ulysses, 2018). Those of us who share some of these marginalized identities and experiences with our students have developed strategies to navigate the hostile landscape. My attempts to cultivate mutuality and interdependence in my in-person classrooms were at once a way of living my responsibilities to the Dish with One Spoon, supporting my own sense of belonging in the institution, and giving students tools to re/claim space. However, no matter how much I built collectivity and consent into the learning environment, I still maintained basic control. I had the key to the room and the login to the class computer. I usually stood "at the front" and chose how seats were arranged (when they weren't bolted to the floor). Teaching online immediately disrupted this spatialization of power.

To attend online classes, students need hardware (a laptop, tablet, or phone), an internet connection, and an off-campus space. These can be prohibitively expensive. Because white supremacy, capitalism, and colonialism are inextricably entwined, the need for often such material tools has the potential to disproportionately negatively impact Black, Indigenous, and racialized students, among others (Brockbank & Hall, 2023; Sublett, 2020). But access does not map cleanly

onto social identity. For example, while remote learning presents technological barriers to entry, it also opens up the post-secondary environment to students who face discrimination on campus; are precariously housed, transient, or live far away; work full-time and/or have caregiver responsibilities which, again due to capitalism's racialized nature, disproportionately describes students of color (Pressley, 2022; Saia et al, 2022; Turner & Adams, 2024). Further, when we went online, students who had long been traversing the digital divide already knew where to get loaner computers and Wi-Fi sticks, and how to connect to class with their phones. In this way, they immediately became authorities, far more helpful to one another than I could be to them. Though I was initially skeptical, I quickly learned there is no modality that is universally in/accessible; everything is contextual.

Another early surprise in the shift to online was the intimacy of virtual class. In person, students often face the same direction and/or have a relative amount of space between them. Online, we were close to each other's faces, in each other's ears, and able to see into each other's private spaces, or lack thereof. This risked revealing more about students' personal lives than might be desired and/or safe for them. This caused me to adopt a camera and mic-optional policy which I keep to this day. At the same time, the window into peoples' homes opened opportunities for different kinds of connection. For example, at the suggestion of a student, I implemented a practice called "creature call": at any time, anyone was welcome to "call for creatures," prompting those with a dog, cat, rabbit, lizard, or any other non-human animal to put them on camera to give us a moment of humor and joy. We also began taking turns leading grounding exercises, which sometimes included students showing each other the physical objects that keep them from being too distracted – fidget toys, rocks, crystals, big headphones, and plants.

The shift to remote education further changed our relationships to the physical terrain of the classroom. In March 2020, students were scattered. Some were trapped overseas; others relocated to the homes of friends or family outside Toronto. It was initially unclear how I could fulfill my responsibilities to the treaties governing a territory we no longer shared. Our geographic distance, however, only dislocated us from Toronto; it did not take us out of relation with land. Virtual connection rests on a global infrastructure of mining operations, factories, cables, and wires which rely on, overlay, and re-entrench existing colonial forms while enacting new kinds of exploitation and violence (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). To attend to this new reality, instead of focusing on the Dish with One Spoon and Two Row Wampum, we began to talk about the ways we hooked into this worldwide network. This gave students the space to discuss their own Indigeneities where relevant and explore resistance and resurgence struggles in their local areas. As Leonard and Mercier (2014), note, this kind of collaborative reflection "gives a critical sense of place, of one's local context, but also a sense of place in relation to other Indigenous contexts." This, in turn, assists students "in negotiating their relationality with each other," and helps them to "reflect on their current and future roles in shaping spaces that promote Indigenous justice" (pp. 235 – 236). In this way, I came to understand the online classroom as not placeless but multiply emplaced.

Reimagining Participation

In person, we tend to judge engagement by watching our students' body language and listening to their speech. The normative "good student" is one who arrives on time, sits still, raises their hand to speak, and emotes in a restrained and regulated way (Birdwell & Bailey, 2022). Students who arrive late, sit at the back of the class or by the door, wear headphones, look at their

phones or laptops, emote freely or not at all, and/or speak without permission are interpreted as “disruptive,” or “disengaged.” As educators, we are then expected to seek “explanation” for these deviations from the cultural norm and determine which needs and/or reasons are “legitimate” and worthy of accommodation (Edwards et al, 2023; Polish, 2017; Wilson, 2022).

Behavioral norms are not neutral; they emerge directly from capitalism, colonial, white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and ableism (Birdwell & Bailey, 2022). When we treat diverse forms of comportment as objective information about learning or attention, we risk reinforcing these interlocking flows of oppression and/or falling prey to the false belief that we can *make* a student learn by policing their body and affect (Birdwell & Bailey, 2022; Edwards et al, 2023; Polish, 2017; Wilson, 2022). The camera-and-mic-optional online classroom disrupts these tendencies by disappearing some students’ bodies and voices completely. To account for this, early in our shift to remote learning, I asked my class to brainstorm all the ways to demonstrate presence online, ranging from communicating by camera and mic to keeping notes and sharing links to additional information on our discussion topics in the chat. I began using strategies like Andrateasha Fritzgerald’s (2021) “1 – 5” exercise, daily “check in” and “check out” activities, and participation journals where students could document the ways they had participated that might not be apparent to me.

Sharing a physical space with students doesn’t just put us in the position to police their body/minds; it also helps us to notice and intervene on issues that might otherwise be a barrier to learning. When I was teaching in person, I could tell if someone was beginning to panic, or witness and intervene on problematic relationships between students that might manifest in facial expressions, seating arrangements, and whispered asides. My “camera optional” policy not only rendered these things invisible – it concealed major aspects of students’ social identities. This can work to the immediate benefit of students who face certain kinds of discrimination from their peers (Doak 2022; Mowreader, 2024; Pressley 2022; Turner & Adams, 2024); however, it deeply complicates anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogy. Brockbank and Hall (2023) warn against the “color-evasive ideology” that can emerge with the lack of visual information; in their research, they found some educators felt empowered by the online space to ignore or downplay the impacts and reach of white supremacy and other forms of social violence rather than learn skills to assess and intervene on the different ways they manifest in remote classes. They note that the “veil of anonymity” can also embolden students “to spew racism on asynchronous course sites or during synchronous events, without facilitators’ prepared forms of and capacities to intervene” (p. 86).

Attending to these dynamics online requires a distinct set of pedagogical skills. Educators must make meaningful decisions about the parameters we will set for practices like recording and direct messaging, be conscientious about monitoring discussion boards, and learn how to facilitate class while keeping an eye on the chat. We must also “engage in practices of reciprocity and transparency,” name and “challenge power differentials” as they emerge in the online environment, and develop “decision-making processes that are more inclusive, participatory, and equitable and demonstrate a critical awareness of students’ specific experiences, needs, and goals” (Brockbank & Hall, 2023, p. 92). For me, this has meant regularly and transparently situating myself; acknowledging the limits of my experience and lens; openly discussing white supremacy, colonial violence, and other forms of structural domination in the course content and classroom dynamics; soliciting regular feedback in many forms (anonymous, asynchronous, one-on-one) about how I might better challenge “the power, privilege, and ideology underpinning Western academia”; and

modelling humility and repair when I inevitably fail (ibid). Interestingly, I have found being online makes me personally more receptive to difficult feedback and requests for amends.

SETs not only replicate interlocking forms of social oppression; they also suffer from the problem of self-selection. Over the past 10 years, my SETs have had an average response rate of about 40%. This means they are not a fulsome picture of student experience, let alone my teaching success. With that in mind, I want to share an interesting pattern. There has been only a marginal change in my student ratings since going online. For example, the percentage of students who deemed my “Perspectives on Mental Health” and “Substance Use and Addiction” classes “excellent” were 88.5% and 81% (averaged) in 2019 and 91.5% and 84% (averaged) in 2021. However, in the six years I was teaching before the pandemic, at least one comment in each course review referenced my “defensive,” “biased,” and/or “insensitive” responses to students. I would often get feedback like, “not everyone can agree to everything being taught in this course...often times you forced your opinions and thoughts onto students,” or “if the student didn’t share the same opinions as the teacher, they would speak and react in a defensive way.” Though I am, in my own estimation at least, more rigorous in addressing power and oppression now than I was then, I have stopped receiving this specific feedback.

It is possible that what I am seeing is not an improvement in my teaching practice, but a cultural shift in students’ willingness to discuss difficult topics. More importantly, student satisfaction is not a good measure of learning or growth. It seems relevant, however, that I am experientially less defensive and more intentional online. I suspect that this is because I have the structural privilege to teach from a space that meets my own needs. In person, I was constantly finding ways to manage a physical and psychological environment that was less than accessible for me. Teaching from home has allowed me to devote more attention to how I am coming across, and helped me notice more quickly when I am starting to veer into a punitive mindset, seeking validation from or trying to be a savior to students rather than acting as a steward of the learning space.

Flipping the Classroom

Perhaps one of the most substantial changes I have made to my teaching is permanently “flipping” my classes. In the “flipped class,” students engage with material that might have traditionally been delivered synchronously on their own time, freeing up the teacher to “engage with students by means of other learning activities” (Akçayir & Akçayir, 2018, p. 334). Since the start of the pandemic, I have created weekly lectures that aim to synthesize all of the direct teaching material (histories, concepts, skills) and shared them in video, audio, and written format. I invite students to interact with these lectures over the week prior to class but also give them the first hour of our allotted time to watch, listen, or read. This allows me to use our virtual classroom for community building activities, case studies, collective research and open discussion. For reference, I have included the general structure of my live online classroom below, with approximate times (See Figure 1). Note that my classes are scheduled in three-hour blocks, but I only teach for an hour and forty-five minutes to allow them time to engage with the learning material if they haven’t had another chance over the week.

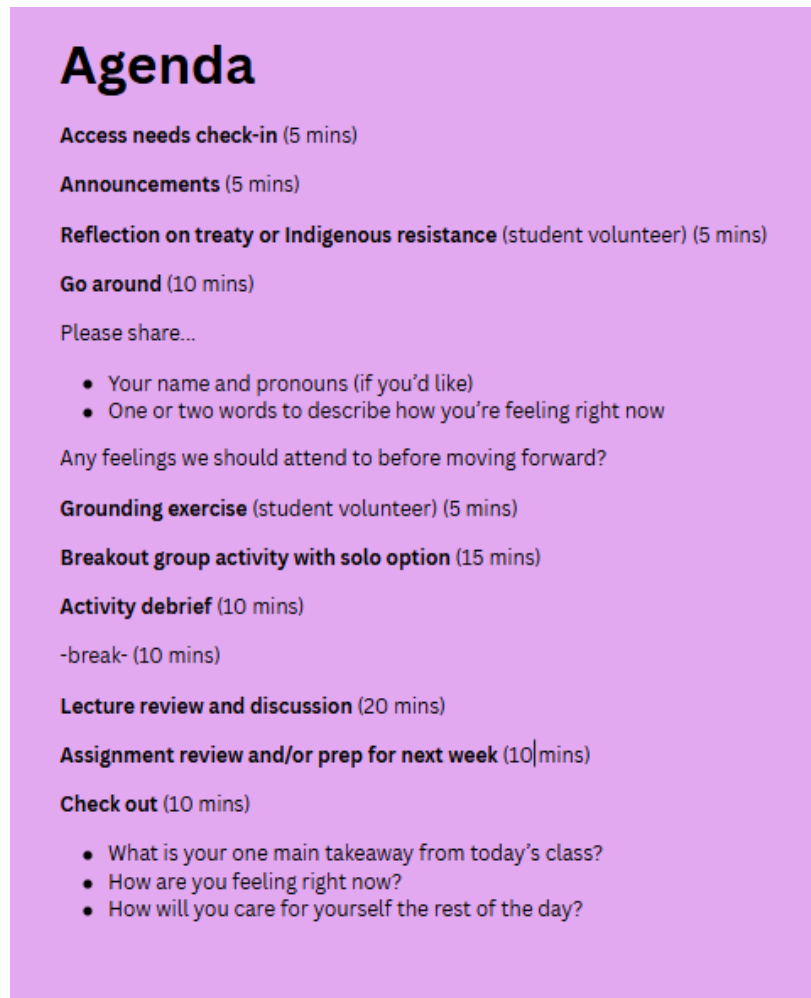


Figure 1. Sample class agenda.

Decades of study show that flipped classrooms increase student engagement and enhance learning (Elmaadaway, 2017; Lo & Hew, 2020; Rotellar & Cain, 2016). Research on the fully online flipped classroom, however, has been mostly limited to the crisis education rolled out in spring 2020 (Lai, 2021; Tang et al, 2020). I follow Jia et al (2023) in asserting that a fully remote flipped class *designed intentionally as such* has unique benefits. I find the flipped structure especially useful in classes designed to challenge deeply held beliefs and upend social norms. My courses aspire towards an abolitionist perspective on social work; this requires us to speak often about the difficult circumstances that bring people into contact with the system, as well as the violence they often experience within it. A “flipped classroom” allows students to hear difficult and intense information on their own terms. This benefits both individuals who see their lived experiences addressed in the material, who previously had to endure classmates’ incredulity or alarm, as well as those unfamiliar with the information whose first reaction might be laughter or disbelief. It also gives students the space to process any issues they may have with the content or its delivery and choose how, when, and where they communicate this to me. Brockbank and Hall (2023) call this the “creative use of synchronous and asynchronous design to cover complex and challenging topics” (p. 93).

All this would be true of an in-person flipped class. Using this model online provides an additional layer of self-determination. Once we're in the synchronous space, students can mute their mics and turn off their cameras when they are having emotional reactions they'd prefer not to share and/or step back to take a break without disrupting the class. Being online also enables students to address other needs: they can show up with a hot pack from bed; they can fiddle, knit, or vocalize without worrying it might disrupt the space; and they can handle urgent caregiving responsibilities. Many educators would characterize all of the above as distractions that interfere with the learning process. To this, I offer two responses: first, while I agree that body/mind presence is essential for learning, I do not believe that we always accurately assess peoples' attention in the in-person class. Indeed, just because someone sits still, makes eye contact, and nods does not necessarily mean that they are internalizing the learning. Second, students are facing mounting pressures in their personal lives. A recent poll by Embark (2023) found that 79% of post-secondary students struggle to afford their education. Sixty percent have had to cut out necessities, and one in three have considered dropping out because of money. International students and educators face increasingly restrictive immigration policies, and the encroachment of the punishment and deportation systems onto campus. We are all living through a time of growing surveillance, the criminalization of solidarity and dissent, and the degradation of working and learning conditions. We also all continue to suffer from extremely high rates of sickness and disability from COVID-19 (Filiatrault, Chakravarty & Gregory, 2025; Smith, 2025) and the resurgence of vaccine-preventable illnesses like measles, even as ecological destruction and public health divestment makes new pandemics inevitable (Feldscher, 2025; Jooste, 2025; Smith, 2021; Weinstein et al, 2024). While we fight for better living conditions for all, we must also be realistic about the pressures students face. We do not want our educational spaces to be for the elite few. In times of interlocking economic, environmental, and social devastation, flexibility may actually be the prerequisite to both attendance and attention.

Conclusion

Principles and Strategies

Distance education is not new: learning by mail has existed since the 1960s and online teaching since the late 1990s (Zawakchi-Richter, 2023). Studies confirm that online and in-person classes are equally effective in achieving "learning outcomes" (Allen et al., 2006; Bates, 2022). The 2020 "pivot" was unplanned, under-resourced, and disruptive in ways that were at once problematic and generative; now that I have had the space to meaningfully plan for online learning, I know that the remote classroom is not a degraded version of the in-person environment but distinct space that requires us to build distinct skills in accessibility, relationality, and trauma-informed practice. The Table 1 provides an overview of how I understand these three principles, as well as some strategies to implement them.

Table 1

Principles of Relational Teaching Online and Strategies for Building Accessible, Relational, and Trauma-Informed Online Classes

Principle	Definition	Strategies
Accessibility	In the online classroom, accessibility means anticipating and working to reduce known barriers and creating a space that is flexible and responsive to peoples' needs.	• Be curious about your students' needs • Offer free or low cost options for learning materials • Normalize conversations about access • Welcome (don't require) all forms of participation • Allow students to opt out of activities • Do not take attendance unless necessary • Consistently solicit and implement feedback
Relationality	In the online classroom, relationality means recognizing that learning happens in community, and prioritizing relationships over course content.	• Use synchronous class-time for interaction • Regularly engage with Indigenous perspectives • Create activities that help students connect with the land and/or Indigenous resurgence movements • Make space for self-selected forms of intimacy • Give students the chance to learn from each other • Be a member of the community yourself
Trauma-informed practice	In the online classroom, trauma-informed practice recognizes the oppressive role of the educational system and creates a space that is predictable and empowering.	• Structure class in a clear and consistent way • Consider a camera-and-mic optional policy • Invite students to meet their own needs • Use content warnings for difficult material • Openly discuss systems of power and domination • Proactively intervene on oppressive dynamics • Be self-reflexive, conscious of your own limitations, and willing to make amends

At the end of the day, no modality will work for students if it doesn't work for us. To create meaningful learning communities, we must show up with curiosity, compassion, and a willingness to negotiate; be vigilant about the places we tend to involve our egos; and eschew practices that unnecessarily consolidate our authority. This is hard work; it has taken me years to learn how to feel connected to people I've never seen or heard. Even now, I sometimes yearn to try activities that only work in-person or grow impatient with students' multi-tasking or depleted energy. However, I recognize the need for online options and am conscious of all my students and I would lose if I returned to in-person teaching. Now when I feel frustrated, I ask myself: Is online learning really the problem here? Or am I responding to the conditions of the wider world? Either way, what is one concrete step I can take away from dehumanized teaching and towards education as "the practice of freedom" (hooks, 2003, p. xv)?

Substance Use and Addiction

It's week 6 of "Substance Use and Addiction." The basic premises of this class – that addiction is a complex, unsettled, socially constructed category; that any drug can be used in a beneficial, casual, and/or problematic way; and that criminalization is far greater danger to people who use drugs than the substances themselves – are challenging. Today, we're talking about a particularly difficult subject: the toxic street drug supply. With the Government of Canada (2025) reporting 21 overdose deaths per day as of March 2025 – a number that will surely rise as life-saving safer supply and harm reduction efforts are defunded and supervised consumption sites closed – most people have already been touched by this manufactured, preventable crisis.

Just before I open the virtual classroom, I get an email from a student saying they recently lost a loved one to overdose and won't be attending today. I thank them and reiterate that they should always prioritize their own well-being. When class begins, however, I am surprised to see them in the participants list. They engage minimally, but stay logged in, occasionally dropping a relevant emoji in the chat. At some point, when the conversation has gotten particularly heavy, another student turns on their camera and points it towards their sleeping dog. I "spotlight" the video and we sit in silence for a minute or two, watching and breathing together. When we start to speak again, we linger on the importance of collective care, the difference it makes when you assume everyone is a survivor of something, trying their best. Before we close, the student who wasn't planning to come thanks their classmates for making a space they could be in even when it felt hard. I am changed by experiences like these.

If these past six years have showed me anything, it's that there's no one way to teach remotely. Online classrooms can prioritize relationality and experimentation. They can move slowly and deliberately. They can make space for spontaneity and joy. In times of what Bedour Alagraa (2021) calls "interminable catastrophe," we must be ready to adapt. The neoliberal dehumanization of post-secondary education is being pushed on us in every modality. We can push back in every modality, too.

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griffin epstein (they/them) is a poet, musician, community-driven researcher, and independent educator and scholar recently laid off from George Brown Polytechnic as part of the largest mass layoff in Ontario history. They aspire to honor their treaty responsibilities and work in solidarity with communities self-organizing for liberation.

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Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*

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Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*

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Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*

Gianna Katsiampoura, *University of Athens*

Harper Keenan, *University of British Columbia*

Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*

Ashwani Kumar, *Mount Saint Vincent University*

Ravi Kumar, *South Asian University*

Saville Kushner, *Drew University*

Yulong Li, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong*

John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*

Kevin R. Magill, *Baylor University*

Alpesh Maisuria, *University of East London*

Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*

Gregory Martin, *University of Technology Sydney*

Cris Mayo, *University of Vermont*

Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*

Peter McLaren, *Chapman University*

Shahrazad Mojab, *University of Toronto*

João Paraskeva, *University of Strathclyde*

Lana Parker, *University of Windsor*

Brad Porfilio, *California State University, Stanislaus*

Marc Pruyn, *University of the Sunshine Coast*

Lotar Rasinski, *University of Lower Silesia*

Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*

Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*

Edda Sant, *University of Manchester*

Doug Selwyn, *SUNY Plattsburgh*

Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*

Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*

Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*

Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*

John Smyth, *Federation Univ. Australia*

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Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*

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