Creativity during the time of pandemics

Małgorzata Marciniak

mmarciniak@lagcc.cuny.edu

LaGuardia Community College of the City University of New York

Abstract: None of us, teachers, ever went through a semester like this. Spring 2020 gave us a tough time but was unique and highly rewarding to those who knew how to take advantage of such circumstances. But now when this semester is over, and I look back, it appears to me that these times may be the most creative and “flowy” that I ever experienced. During these weeks of solitude, I experienced high focus and delight doing old things in the new ways. Instead of being distracted by the commute, city activities or meeting friends, I was able to circulate my thoughts around the classes. In this manuscript I would like to make an attempt to answer the question what made this time so divine. Was it the solitude? The focus? Lack of other activities? Or the urgent necessity the moment? The self-assessment of my classes was assisted by feedback from students received in a form of a mid-term survey.

Creative Flow

For the first time I read about creative flow in the books of Csikszentmihaly (2015) and I immediately realized that this experience was familiar to me and that I valued it greatly even if I did not recognize it consciously as a separate state of mind. It was clustered together with other states of the mind related to study. Then I began reflecting how to make this experience of creative flow more intense and be able to bring it to my life when needed. In addition, I saw reasons to expose my students and mentees to the concept of creativity and creative flow. Whenever I pointed out to my students the topics related to creativity and a creative a flow, they immediately responded and claimed that they are very familiar with the feeling. I began searching for creative flow and creativity as a part of my scholarly path and my personal life. In particular, I was curious how to create an atmosphere of a research team or how to create a schedule of activities for myself to encourage that state. The semester when we suddenly converted our in-person classes to remote mode proved to be particularly productive and valuable for my research in creativity.

Doing Old Things in New Ways

In my understanding, trying old things in new ways provides an excellent opportunity for creative ideas that can be verified through a deliberate and repetitive feedback process. Throughout the entire semester I had a chance to test new teaching ideas for remote learning. The very first step was easy for me due to my extensive use of a writing stylus and communication apps such as zoom. During the first day of remote classes, so incredibly stressful to my colleagues, I simply logged in to zoom, opened a writing app and began lecturing. I recorded the lectures, watched the
recording, and immediately realized that my performance during remote teaching requires significant improvements. But two things made me really happy about that: first of all, I knew that the recordings will give me a neutral feedback, and second of all, I knew that due to the urgent change of the teaching modality, I will not be judged for not being perfect. With these two things in mind I have begun reflecting on how to develop my new remote teaching style by the method of trial and error.

CONSTANT FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS AND VIDEOS

After watching the videos few times, I quickly observed that the quality of sound was insufficient for uninterrupted attention. My students kept notifying me that the sound goes on and off. I realized that it was due to my rocking motion and me grabbing my tablet’s mic with my hands. To improve that, I tried to use a headset but did not help since I got entangled in the cord and then I realized the quality of the sound got even worse because the microphone from my cellphone headset did not catch my voice well. I ended up buying a professional microphone suitable for the timbre of my voice. Since that time, the quality of the recordings significantly improved, and I did not hear any complaints from my students.

The quality of the videos proved to be much trickier to improve. I was certain that my handwriting was legible and the quality of the screen was very high however, when I asked my students during a survey whether they can see the screen well, many of them said that on their screens my handwriting appears very small and they cannot see it well. To respond to this issue, I enlarged my screen. However, it took until the end of the semester for me to realize what the true problem was. Depending on the spread of my notes, I positioned my tablet vertically or horizontally. But the view on my students’ screens did not adjust in the same manner. If their position was horizontal and mine was vertical, then their view had two dark stripes on the sides and the size of my vertical screen was much smaller than my view. When I realized that, I simply flipped my tablet horizontally (even if it was not always the most convenient position to keep my notes displayed) and did not change it. In this particular case, without students feedback I would have never figured out why they could not see my screen in its proper enlargement.

TWO-SIDED RESPECT AND APPRECIACION

Throughout the entire semester me and my students kept exchanging signs of respect and appreciation. During each class I asked my students whether they are staying safe, healthy and sane. My students kept asking the same questions to me. One of my students expressed her appreciation to all her teachers because she thought it was very difficult to convert in just few days entire courses into a remote mode. Every day, when I felt moody, I thought that I cannot crash mentally, because I have to be there for my students, and they are waiting for me, looking forward for a quality instruction delivered in a professional way.
During one of my office hours, a wife of my student came to the camera and said that her husband likes my class very much and talks about it all the time. That particular student said that he dislikes online classes and dropped his other courses but is staying in my class because he really likes the teaching style. I felt very empowered by these statements and was even more motivated to improve my lectures. Another student, who met me during office hours, emphasized that the fact that I asked students to fill a survey was very important to her. As she was hiding behind her computer screen, she felt very anonymous, but the survey gave her a voice.

STILL LOTS OF THINGS TO DEVELOP AND IMPROVE

I have no doubts that remote teaching is different from teaching in person. It requires different approaches and different assessment. There is still a lot of work to do to improve my remote teaching style. I thought I could look through some YouTube videos of lectures and get inspired by them.

So far, my biggest concern is related to designing exams that minimize academic dishonesty. In exam problems I am trying to bring a flow of exercises that start with basic skills, progress to more complicated tasks and conclude with some written statements of explanations. In my understanding, problems that offer combination of skills such as drawing, writing and math skills are suitable for remote exams.

FALLING INTO A ROUTINE OF WORKING AROUND THE CLOCK

As I heard from my colleagues, some of them fell into laziness and some of them fell into a routine of working around the clock. I was in the second group. Having a delightful line of inquiry related to my work and having no motivation to stop working, no meeting friends, no concerts, museums or exhibitions, I fell into the routine of working since early morning till late evening. This lifestyle was enjoyable for few weeks, but I quickly realized that I was becoming less efficient and less motivated. At that moment I run into another book by Csikszentmichaly (1994) about creating own schedule that facilitates flow. Inspired by his work and again delighted by the idea of doing something new, I began experimenting with my schedule by introducing walks, listening to the audiobooks and combining other activities with smart multitasking.

Thus, I developed activities such as doing the dishes while listening to casual books and exercising during meetings, where I did not have to show my face. This led me to further improvements of my home office by “proofreading” documents by listening to them with the “Read out Loud”. This way I was able to catch typos invisible to my eyes such as “form” instead of “from”. They look alike but sound so different. I certainly used this option before but not for the purpose of finding typos in my own documents. Thus, to avoid working around the clock I started reflecting on and improving my work schedule and my working style. This led me to scheduling walks, times for artwork and times for staying in touch with friends. Eventually, I was able to leave the vicious circle of working around the clock.
MIDTERM SURVEY AND STUDENTS RESPONSES

After searching for suitable questions and consulting with my colleagues, I prepared a mid-term survey via the Survey-Monkey. Here are the questions asked to students. Some questions may seem a little plain but placing them in the survey yielded to quite unexpected results.

1. Are you experiencing any difficulties or challenges? With yourself, family members or friends?
2. Describe your access to a computer and a WIFI network? Can you use them freely? Do you experience any difficulties?
3. Do you hear the lecture well? Is my microphone working well? Are your speakers working well?
4. Do you see the lecture well? Is my camera working well? Is your screen clear, large and bright enough to provide a comfortable view?
5. Are you receiving my messages? Did you open the OneNote document? Do you watch the video recording from our class posted on the Dropbox?
6. Are there any policies in our course (homework, grading, etc.) that you think should be changed? I can't promise to take your advice, but I will consider it very seriously.
7. Is there anything about our course you particularly like? As we make changes, I want to ensure we preserve what is best about our course and to potentially build on it.
8. Have you attended our virtual classes life, via the recordings, or not at all? Describe your experience, especially what has worked for you, and what has been more challenging.
9. Do you feel comfortable participating in our course? Is there anything I could do to make you feel more comfortable participating?
10. Can you share strategies you have used to adjust to distance-learning that have worked for you that I should recommend to other students? Please describe these strategies. Alternatively, you can describe strategies that haven't worked for you, and what you plan to do differently after the break.

The response rate among my two classes was about 50%. For the first question most responders reported no difficulties or challenges. But few mentioned difficulties with staying focused at home, having difficulties overcoming the temptation to visit the social media which are just “one click away.” Some reported losses in family, illnesses and this escalated as the semester progressed. To my surprise, nobody reported difficulties with Wi-Fi or computer access. As I was expecting, most students complained about the quality of the sound but unexpectedly, few mentioned that the writing is too small for them to read on their screens.

Since the class syllabus did not require attendance of all class meetings and recommended watching the videos in case of missing classes, I was expecting mixed answers to the question about watching videos. Similarly, since opening class notes in OneNote requires some software skills and not all students have patience to deal with stubborn software, I was expecting varied
answers to that part of the survey. In terms of course policies, some students asked for more quiz time and some for more class-time. In general, students appreciated access to the recordings and my willingness to answer questions during lectures. Some students mentioned that they prefer remote classes because previously they had a long commute, had difficulties paying attention while in a classroom since they felt distracted while among others.

Encouraging and monitoring students’ participation in remote synchronous classes has been a challenging task throughout the semester. This challenge was the motivation for question 9 of the survey. Students answers varied as much as their behavior in class. The group of responders split into three equal subgroups, with some students claiming that they feel comfortable, some that they do not, and some claimed that they do not know. One response pointed out that answering questions via chat and sending it only to me, instead of the entire class was way more comfortable than sending a message to everybody in class. I concluded that encouraging private messaging may be the way to approach this challenge of students’ participation in remote synchronous classes. In addition, students earn “activity” points by responding to my questions, but this is not a new idea since I used it previously in my classes to give credit for students who solved problems on the board.

The most interesting part of the survey came from students answers to the last question about their tips for studying in the new mode of learning. Some students had no suggestions and no tips, but some apparently got very creative in dealing with new circumstances and described their methods in long responses. One student mentioned that he studies by following the examples of the videos and watching them multiple times. Another gave a suggestion of making a list of things to do and then pacing himself on the progress. Someone said: “wake up early to get things done” and “split up work instead of doing it all at once”. One student wrote:

“I had to be extremely punctual and make sure that I am on Blackboard or ready to get on zoom 10 minutes earlier. I started checking my email and Blackboard announcements very frequently. I made myself a calendar and I write ‘post it’ reminders all over the place so I remember what I am scheduled to do.”

Another student said that when he studies, he keeps no lights in a dark room with the only light coming from the monitor and the keyboard. This helps him focus and avoid distractions since he does not see anything around.

Someone mentioned creating a habit of daily studies to avoid accumulating stress, which would add to life stress. Another person reviews the class material before attending the lecture to “get tuned” to the course. All these suggestions were very helpful, and I could apply them to myself.

MENTORING STUDENTS: FINDING TOPICS

Recently, I experienced creativity very clearly, when I was speaking with a student about possible project topics. My intention was to find a topic that lies within his interest and my capacity. Usually
I start such a conversation by asking the student about his interest and hobbies and this particular student was a firefighter in the past. This made me think about my previous projects in new circumstances of firefighting. My projects are about solar panels and aerodynamics and since I could not think of solar panels being in a fire and still functioning thus, I focused on thinking about aerodynamics. In the aerodynamics project we work on optimization of the design of the parameters of the blades of a wind turbine. I kept thinking about the fire and the wings of wind turbines then suddenly I visualized drones flying into the fire and replacing the firefighters in the dangerous part of their work. That was my concept, but we did not simply end there. In the second stage of the discussion I asked the student what functions he sees for the drones. He thought for few seconds and mentioned the situation when the firetruck cannot arrive to the scene because of traffic. I was thinking about a situation of friend of mine and her car getting on fire, her fear, and a lack of help. This would be a situation where drones can patrol a highway and provide immediate response during accidents and situations that require help. I asked my student to think of different functions of the drones and different designs they would need. But to myself, I was thinking to combine the functions of the thermal camera and the drones for the purpose of searching for the fire in a city. When I looked at my student, I observed light that went through him when he thought of working on such a project. We both agreed that our conversation was very fruitful and made our days.

SUMMARY

It seems to me that after reading about creativity and intentional observation of creative moments, the quality of my enthusiasm toward research and work had increased significantly. I feel happier when I am working on research even if this research is about managing own schedule. It seems that observing creative moments makes my students happier as well. It may be due to increased awareness of the moments of enthusiasm and assigning certain values to these moments. Now I am looking forward to the summer and waiting for working on projects with my mentees.

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REFERENCES
