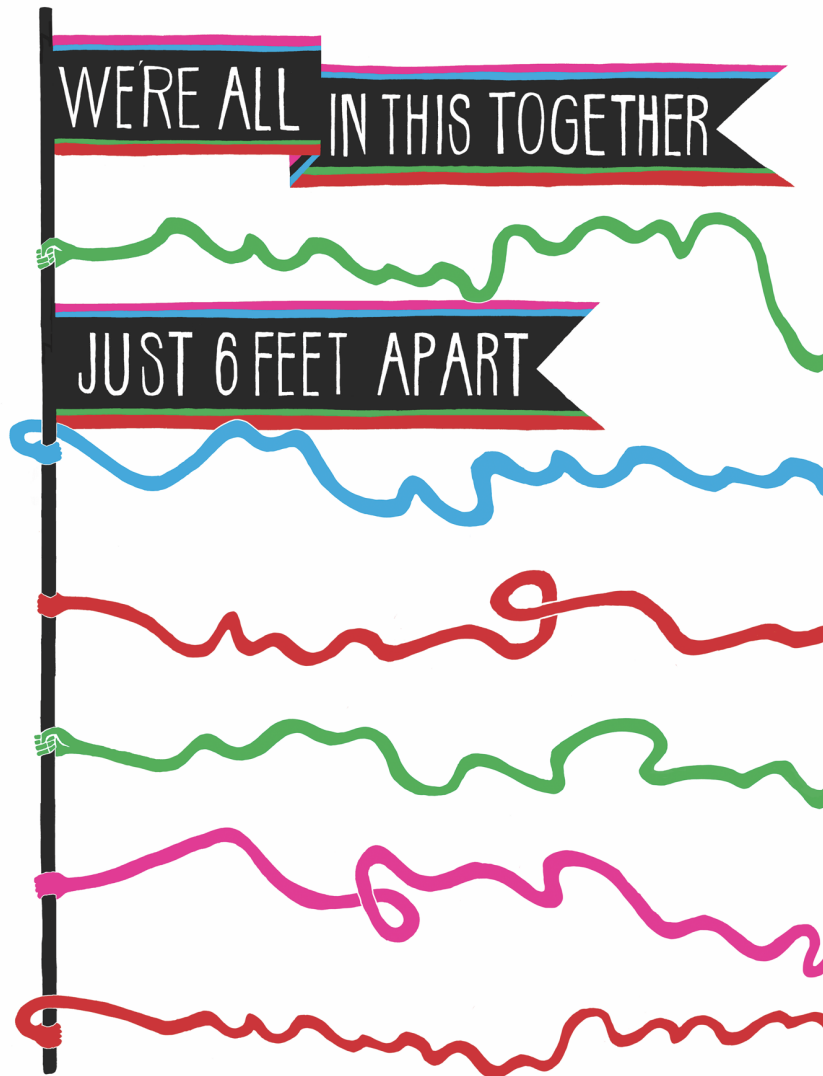


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Other Worlds and Educations Are Possible: Lessons from Teaching and Learning During Covid-19

by Neil Meyer and Jocelyn Wills



JOSH MACPHEE, CARE PACKAGE #3, JUSTSEEDS COLLABORATION

Just as COVID-19 is particularly dangerous to populations with preexisting conditions, the virus ferociously swept across the world because of preexisting social conditions: the precarity of work; the unaffordability of housing; the depth of racial, ethnic, and class divides; a profoundly unequal global economy; and the failure of many governments worldwide to rise to the challenges.

- Thomas J. Segrue, *The Long Year: A 2020 Reader* (2022), 1.

Readers of *Radical Teacher* know well both the preexisting social conditions Thomas Segrue identified in his introduction to *The Long Year* as well as how much Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated the ways in which settler colonialism, militarism, racism, neoliberalism, and the politics of austerity have corrupted education and failed all but the favored few. At the same time, while #NoReturnToNormal inspired many students, staff, and faculty members to rethink their futures and the roles they want to play in the creation of a better, more equitable, and sustainable world, many worry that the “not going back to normal” window has already begun to close. But as David Graeber reminded us, prior to his untimely death in September 2020, collectively we cannot allow that to happen, particularly when we consider the mass death and social disruptions that the pandemic caused, including the ways in which Covid orphans and their surviving caregivers must now navigate an increasingly uncertain future, teens find themselves forced to take on greater caregiving roles in their families, and mental health issues abound across generations.

Moreover, because Covid further accelerated 50-year trends, more people have finally begun to recognize the synergies between pandemics, climate change, wealth and income inequality, technological divides, authoritarian trends, racist violence, and police brutality. Triggered by Covid and the events that have followed, long-time and more recent activists have also created intersectional communities calling for widespread changes to protect those made most vulnerable by the capitalist obsession with expansion and exploitation without end. (Smith, 2022; Penner, 2022; Louis, 2022; Victor, 2021; Graeber, 2021; Forde, 2021; and Uwan, 2020)

Happily for all of us, the authors whose essays appear in this volume provide lessons from the pandemic that can help us to focus on what we need to do in and beyond the classroom in the days and years ahead. Together, they also point to the need for re-imagined communities of care, where multiple constituents can participate in and listen to the educational needs of students and their family members, rank-and-file staff members, and faculty both full-time and contingent. The authors in this special issue share their strategies to deal realistically with the psychological consequences of the pandemic, on students, teachers, staff, and administrators. Their experiences reveal the importance of listening—really listening—to students, and the ways in which young people have experienced the pandemic, loss and responsibility, front-line work, “no going back,” and

their own versions of the “great resignation.” Indeed, increased numbers of students and members of Generation Z know that they have received an unjust inheritance, and will continue to demand more meaningful learning opportunities, active listening on the part of the institutions they engage, more work-life balance and self-care time, a greater emphasis on passion over dead-end make-work, more resources for mental and physical health, and programs that allow them safely to express their emotions and identities. Those of us involved in the larger academic project ignore their voices and concerns at our own peril. (Smith, 2022)

Best practices in online learning require both rigorous training for instructors as well as substantial orientation sessions and support for students; the pandemic allowed for neither. It will take years to untangle the consequences of this shift. Centralized administrative dictates forced students (and instructors) to sign up for sometimes unvetted and unproven learning platforms, in over-crowded Zoom spaces, where everyone involved experienced new forms of surveillance and the consequences of increased screen time. At the same time, online environments also exacerbated already unsustainable wage-decline and cost-of-living crises (made evident when faculty asked students to turn on their cameras), childcare issues, digital divides, dictates that faculty and staff “lean-in” as technological fixers and psychologists without any training, and the realities of students being hyper-connected yet isolated and disengaged. These are just some of psychological challenges and jolts the Zoom-era provided in an environment where we still know far too little about the consequences of increased surveillance and life online. We do, however, have many tools to guide us in the days ahead, including Sherry Turkle’s important work on the power of talk (and active, empathetic listening) in the digital age, and Cathy O’Neil’s cautionary tales about big data and online surveillance, both of which have increased inequalities and continue to threaten democracies around the world. Technologies cannot solve our economic, political, social, and cultural problems; and we ignore these realities at our own peril as well. (Gray, 2022; Turkle, 2015; O’Neil, 2016)

***Technologies cannot solve our economic, political, social, and cultural problems; and we ignore these realities at our own peril as well.***

Emergency online instruction also broke down social barriers between work and home. So many early discussions (and battles!) about camera policies raised questions about what it means to be “present” in the classroom, what it means to give instructors and students windows into one another’s homes and learning spaces, what it means to collapse work-life boundaries. Over time, students from low-income households, seeking to help their struggling families, learned that they could work extra shifts while seeking off-camera, online education. Academic performance suffered as a result and in ways that have reshaped in-person learning as well. Thus, we need to have larger conversations

about how to re-engage students about the importance of an education (as opposed to “the degree” that promises them little more than a lifetime of drudgery in precarious work). Students have also reminded radical as well as conservative teachers that unconscionable digital divides and racial as well as economic inequalities exist beyond what many academics could previously imagine, inequalities that continues to privilege the few at the expense of the many. (Marcus, 2021; Smith, 2022; and Louis, 2022)

All of these daunting problems threaten to plough us under, but as our authors describe, one really important and positive insight has come out of online learning: it forced more faculty members and administrators to see the complexity of their students’ lives. And this too is something engaged faculty need to keep high on the agenda, something that requires constant attention. We need to see the complexities of our students’ lives, to hear their voices, to understand their pain and what they have endured, and to help them create the lives of purpose they desperately want in the days ahead. Only then can we hope to reimagine a more generous, equitable, and sustainable educational environment, particularly for the most vulnerable among us. Only then can we push for the kinds of policies our students and larger societies need to thrive as participants in communities with meaning and purpose. And such listening will allow us to deal realistically with declining enrollments, not by hiring more layers of administrators, but by improving faculty-to-student ratios, and creating communities of support for more public funding for education and infrastructural improvements, smaller class sizes, and better mental health services, to name but a few.

Along with our colleagues near and far, we know how much many of us have compulsively dwelled upon what has happened to our students and colleagues, and to us, during the pandemic. And we welcome this opportunity to think and act more deeply about the future of lifelong learning. We hope the essays in this special issue will prompt us to create the scaffolding we need for that future, one committed to liberation in and beyond the classroom, one that allows us to continue to check in, on our students, our colleagues, ourselves. Again, this will require greater emphasis on building communities of solidarity and intersectionality, of creating environments that highlight the need to learn from multiple voices, particularly the most vulnerable but also those with experiences and successes we ourselves currently lack. (See, for example, Tooze, 2020; and <https://socialprogress.org>, the latter of which posits new measures of what constitutes healthy societies, not based upon GDP but rather on our abilities to meet basic human needs. As you will see, the United States in particular, has much to learn from the experiences of other nation-states.)

The essays in this special issue of *Radical Teacher* expose and attempt to address the preexisting conditions Segrue and others have identified. Indeed, one of the profound ironies of the “pandemic era” is how a once-in-a-lifetime health crisis exposed and exacerbated many of the challenges and inequalities that have plagued education for decades. As you read through the essays, you will find new challenges and insights that have emerged from the pandemic, but also long-standing battles about the rights of students and workers, the effects of austerity budgeting,

and the need for much greater collective collaboration and more educational, workplace, and political solidarity.

White supremacy, and the multiple inequalities that flow from it, stands as one of the most egregious preexisting social conditions we need to address, not only in the United States but beyond its borders. Amid the lockdowns of 2020, more people had no choice but to see the dire and ongoing problem of racism, as people young and old streamed out of their covid cocoons to join the Black Lives Matter movement and to protest the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and others. Shermaine Jones’s “Breath-taking Pedagogy: Self-care & Ethical Pedagogy in the Climate of Anti-Blackness and COVID-19” addresses the pandemic’s racial reckoning within the university context through a close reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, the reconsideration of white supremacist monuments, and the context of the ongoing “fragility of Black life.” Allowing time in her pedagogy for deep breathing and reflection, Jones learned to give students more educational agency and room for creativity. In sharing her experiences, Jones articulates how much our pedagogies need to change to reflect the complexities that students bring to the project of learning. Jones also asks us to consider how much students, particularly first-generation students of color and members of the working poor need to feel respected so that they can receive the intellectual odysseys they deserve. That involves, Jones argues, “letting go,” and being mindful about the need to take time to breathe, to reflect, to create spaces and exercises in self-care. Providing such opportunities to students, Jones allowed students to express themselves in new but no less rigorous ways, all in spaces that create room for both healing and hope.

Jones describes “an ethical teaching practice that privileges equity, empathy, and self-care,” which we also see modeled in shea wesley martin’s and Henry “Cody” Miller’s “The Category Is ‘Pandemic Queer’: Reading, Connecting, and Reimagining Literacy with LGBTQ+ Youth in the Age of COVID-19.” martin and Miller imagined equity, empathy, and self-care through the creation of an online reading group that focused on LGBTQ+ young adult literature. Beyond the usual conventions of teaching literature to this population, martin’s and Miller’s pedagogy “embraced the messy and nuanced nature that accompanies a queer and trans existence.” The authors describe their national book discussion group as one that, “despite being marketed as a literacy education space...would prioritize care, affirmation, and holding space for the full presence of the LGBTQ+ youth who showed up on Zoom each time we met.” Their mindful, online affirming learning space reflects the ways in which Jones created spaces for her students to “breathe” in a world that cares little about their survival. Together, they cared for each other and taught their teachers much about the precarity as well as joy of their lives during the pandemic, freely sharing more than martin and Miller originally dared to hope.

Bijoyeta Das’s work reflects a different kind of mindful teaching. In “Teaching Covid 19 to Journalism Students,” Das explores the scourge of misinformation that has become a dominant concern of the mainstream media, and how news reporting has affected the ways in which people (mis)understood—and continue to (mis)understand—the

pandemic. As a professor of journalism, Das had to, like our previous contributors, listen to student voices in the midst of a pandemic in order to reimagine teaching and reporting in ethical ways. But she also had to rethink what it means to teach journalism about and within a pandemic where a culture of disinformation always looms. The insights gained from this piece serve to remind us that whitewashing history and current events has brought us to the cliff where we now find ourselves, and that we need to rise above the false equivalencies of narratives that have created so much damage around the world. Indeed, Das's students have provided a blueprint for dealing with our historical and contemporary realities so that we have a better chance to create a more humane, equitable, and sustainable future.

It is impossible to understand the consequences of the pandemic on education without foregrounding its disparate impacts on working class, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC student populations. One area of education that has received less attention centers on the co-curricular, after-school, and supplemental education programs integral to many students' lives and especially important for marginalized communities, where many front-line workers live. In "The Community School Initiative in Toronto: Mitigating Opportunity Gaps in the Jane and Finch Community in the Wake of COVID-19," Ardavan Eizadirad, Sally Abudiab, and Brice Baartman present us with one such program. Their work with marginalized communities allowed them to rethink the importance of focusing on student opportunity gaps rather than achievement ones, and the ways in which disadvantaged, racialized, low-income families helped to expose multiple inequalities during the pandemic. That focus also exposed how much teachers, whether K-12 or in higher education, need to reach beyond the classroom, to learn about what family members within the community need and want from education. Listening emerged again as central to the creation of a better future for the multiple constituents that educational environments serve and draw upon, while their emphasis on "unequal by design" allows us to reimagine a post-Covid world that can and must become more equitable and inclusive "by design." That means working with the wider community to create wrap-around services for students and communities alike. Their work also exposes, once again, the fallacies of color-blindness and the myths of a meritocratic, capitalist world order, not only in the United States but also in Canada and other places where class and racial divides as well as austerity reign. Reinforcing the essays that precede theirs, Eizadirad, Abudiab, and Baartman make another cogent argument for centering community voices, not only as a pedagogical strategy but also to build trust and solidarity.

Our final two essays address solidarities beyond the classroom, allowing us opportunities to think structurally about radical and organized change in opposition to the "new normal." Rhiannon M. Maton's "'What We Want is the Same Thing You Want': Educator Union Organizing for the 'Common Good' during Covid-19" analyzes the ways several prominent educator unions worked with their larger communities to address the challenges and needs of reopening schools amid the pandemic. Employing lessons from unions that worked with community partners, including during the 2016 Chicago Teachers' Strike, Maton argues that

"such unions pointed to the ways in which community health concerns are bound up with the learning and working conditions of schools, and thus linked the health and well-being of children, families, and communities with that of educators." By seeking a just and healthy return to school as part of a larger project of organized labor and the communities in which it resides, Maton's essay offers us ways to think about how unions and community organizations can work together by finding common concerns, and organizing for the common good, on which to build greater solidarities and public debate about the future of education no matter the uncertainties ahead.

Finally, this issue closes with "Agents of Change: Modeling Two-Year College English Teacher's Change Resilience and Saturation during COVID and (we hope) Beyond" by Emily K. Suh, Brett M. Griffiths, Lizbett Tinoco, Patrick Sullivan, and Sarah Snyder. The authors use the data from a broad survey of English instructors to open a window into the challenges *and* opportunities and possibilities that emerged from teaching in the early days of the pandemic. Employing that data, the authors argue that some of the changes made and lessons learned afford a "thoughtspace" and energizing environment "for radical teachers to adapt their curriculum and connect better with students" and each other, to take seriously the role of ongoing mentoring and care no matter where the pandemic leads.

The range of concerns and ideas discussed in this issue represent a beginning sample of the work we will have to engage in while learning and teaching in the midst of a rolling pandemic. Visions of "herd immunity" and a post-COVID "new normal" are the product of magical thinking more than epidemiological reality. One of the more pernicious forces we will have to contend with is the desire to live "normally," which for many means living without any mitigation (or even acknowledgement) of the spread or severity of COVID-19. A few sobering news items at the end of August of this year reveal the lethal contradictions of this drive towards a perverse normalcy. First, the *New York Times* and other outlets reported on the historic drop in life expectancy in the United States, which has fallen nearly three years since the pandemic began. Meanwhile, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reports both that more colleges are foregoing vaccine mandates and that the mental health crisis affecting college-aged students is causing a high number of students to consider dropping out. (Rabin, 2022; Adedoyin, 2022; Diep, 2022)

Taken together, these sources reveal a grim picture of a nation that refuses to learn from the pandemic but that has also normalized outsized levels of death and harm. Our teaching and activism will have to push against the right-wing nihilism that undergirds this push for a "new normal." We believe the essays collected here offer ways to think about and enact that work and we look forward to more teaching and activism that continues to push for "other educations" that center the rights of those made most vulnerable by neoliberalism and the politics of austerity, the precarity of work, the unaffordability of housing and other social goods, racial, ethnic, class, and digital divides, and the profoundly unequal global economy that capitalist dreams launched. As the authors in this issue remind us, other worlds are possible, including other kinds of educational

environments, ones that deal with the realities of the worlds we have created and now inhabit. Now is the time to fight for a better future, one free from the constraints of unequal and unsustainable environments.

Uwan, Ekemini. "There's No Going Back to 'Normal.'" *The Atlantic*, June 2020.

Victor, Daniel. "Over 120,000 American Children Have Lost a Parent or Caregiver to Covid-19, Study Says." *New York Times*, 07 October 2021.

## References

Adedoyin, Oyin. "As More Stressed-Out Students Consider Dropping Out, Surgeon General Pushes College Leaders to Ramp Up Support." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 August 2022.

Diep, Francie. "Why Some Colleges Are Removing Their Covid-19 Vaccination Mandates." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 31 August 2022.

Flaherty, Colleen. "Covid Was the Straw that Broke the Camel's Back." *Inside Higher Ed*, 20 December 2021.

Forde, Kaelyn. "'No Going Back to Normal': 43,000 US Kids Lost a Parent to Covid." *Aljazeera*, 31 May 2021.

Graeber, David. "After the Pandemic, We Can't Go Back to Sleep." *Jacobin*, March 2021.

Gray, Rosie. "Teachers in America Were Already Facing Collapse. Covid Only Made It Worse." *Buzz Feed News*, 01 April 2022.

Louis, Errol. "New York is Failing Its Covid-Orphaned Kids." *New York Magazine Intelligencer*, April 2022.

Marcus, Jon. "Colleges Face Reckoning as Plummeting Birthrate Worsens Enrollment Declines." *Hechinger Report*, 22 May 2021.

O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. Crown, 2016.

Penner, Mack. "The Fight to Get Back to Normal Is a Political Dead End." *Jacobin*, March 2022.

Rabin, Roni Caryn. "U.S. Life Expectancy Falls Again in 'Historic' Setback." *New York Times*, 31 August 2022.

Segrue, Thomas J. and Caitlin Zaloom, eds. *The Long Year: A 2020 Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.

Singer, Natasha. "Online Schools are Here to Stay, Even After the Pandemic." *New York Times*, 11 April 2021.

Smith, Caroline. "How Teens are Experiencing Their Version of the 'Great Resignation.'" *MindShift*, 24 January 2022.

Social Progress Imperative. *Tackling Covid-19*. <https://www.socialprogress.org>.

Tooze, Adam. "We Are Living Through the First Economic Crisis of the Anthropocene." *The Guardian*, 07 May 2020.

Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. Penguin Books, 2015.

**Neil Meyer** is Professor of English at LaGuardia Community College. He currently serves as the manuscript co-editor here at *Radical Teacher*.

**Jocelyn Wills**, Professor of History at Brooklyn College, City University of New York, focuses her research, writing, and teaching on the history of capitalism; surveillance studies; technological innovation and historical amnesia; American dreams and realities; microhistories of everyday strivers; and Brooklyn in the world.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://pittopenlibrarypublishing.org/).