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Reflections of a World in Crisis

Photojournalism professor Robin Hoecker discusses teaching during a period of pandemic and social unrest

A protester raises his fist above a sea of police officers outside of Trump Tower in Chicago. (Photo by Haaris Arain)

Spring quarter of 2020 will surely go down as one of the most chaotic in my teaching career.

I teach photojournalism. As the novel coronavirus marched across the globe and started popping up in Chicago, DePaul decided to cancel in-person classes and close its dormitories. At first, I thought the challenges were going to be mainly technological as teaching shifted online. However, technology turned out to be the least of our problems.

Students scrambled to move home. Others remained in their apartments, alone. These vastly different circumstances would deeply shape their experiences during the pandemic.

Soon Chicago locked down, and the governor issued a strict stay-at-home order for the state. While other journalism students could report by phone or from a distance, this became a near impossibility for photojournalism, where the mantra is always “get closer.”

To get around this issue, I relaxed our ethics guidelines to allow students to document themselves and their families and roommates. My “Humans of Chicago” assignment became “Humans of Your Household.” The result was a much more personal view of my students than I had ever been exposed to before.

Camera gear was an issue. Normally, students have access to professional gear, but because campus was closed and students were scattered across the globe, some students had to muddle through with iPhones, while others had their own high-end equipment and drones. I quickly created a second track of lessons and materials for students with smartphones.

To my surprise, internet access was also an issue. Some students who moved back to rural areas did not have fast enough internet connections to watch videos or participate in Zoom calls. One student completed her schoolwork from her car, spending several hours a day parked outside the public library to access its Wi-Fi signal.

Some students had a tough time adjusting to living back home with their families. In some cases, the lack of personal space and added family drama made it harder for them to focus on their schoolwork. For students living alone, the months of isolation took a toll.

As the pandemic dragged on and businesses remained closed, the economic impact on students and their families became apparent. Several students lost their jobs, and their families felt the economic strain of not being able to work. Many reached out to let me know that they were struggling, and I tried my best to steer them toward help and resources.

“RACISM WAS ALSO A CONCERN, PARTICULARLY FOR SOME OF MY ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS. AS POLITICIANS, INCLUDING THE PRESIDENT, BLAMED THE PANDEMIC ON CHINA AND IMMIGRATION, THESE STUDENTS FACED VERBAL THREATS FROM STRANGERS.”

—Assistant Professor Robin Hoecker

It was in this atmosphere that the video of a police officer slowly suffocating George Floyd surfaced. When the Black Lives Matter protests broke out in response, many of my students, roughly half of whom identify as people of color, participated in and covered the events despite the health risks. They produced some of their best work.

My students created a remarkable visual time capsule of a world in crisis. It cemented my resolve that visual storytelling matters now more than ever.

The spring quarter made me realize the importance of trauma-informed teaching, which involves “examining the influence and impact on students in our schools of factors such as racism (explicit, implicit, and systematic) as well as poverty, peer victimization, community violence and bullying,” according to Edutopia. Here are some strategies I plan to use or continue.

Give students an opportunity to tell you what’s going on in their lives. I would not have known what situations my students were facing if they hadn’t been photographing their own lives. Adding questions to reflection papers, like “How does this reading relate to your life right now?,” prompted students to share their experiences and concerns.

Maintain clear lines of communication. Some students prefer email, but many do not. I made sure I was also available through social media direct messages, as well as scheduling online video chats for students. I proactively reached out to students who were missing assignments to see if they were OK.

Know what resources are available for students. With help from my college, I knew how to refer students



“Help us,” reads a message on DePaul’s University Hall as students moved out of the dorms during finals week of winter quarter. (Photo by Amy Do)



“The worst part of being in a car all day is the limited access to a bathroom. Back pain, cramps, and headaches are almost an everyday occurrence and there is not much I can do about it.” (Photo by Brooke Sievers)

to mental health counseling, as well as some financial assistance. These were changing rapidly during the pandemic, so before fall quarter starts, I will make sure to have an updated list of resources and know who to contact for what.

Collaborate with other educators. I found much comfort and support in online educational communities.

Teach about systems of oppression. One of the best things I could do for my students was to make visible systems of oppression and provide historical context for how those systems were created. I address the lack of diversity in journalism in every course I teach.

I have no idea what fall 2020 will bring. I hope that by reflecting on spring, I will be better prepared, no matter what happens.