
Understanding Privilege in a Pandemic: The Small Systems that Perpetuate the Large Structures

I bought a weighted blanket. I read somewhere that it would help me sleep. Sleep has been hard to come by these days. So, I bought a weighted blanket. Is it working? Hard to say. However, it is a small attempt to manage my world during a pandemic. That is the goal of this forum, correct? To explore the impact, management strategies, emotions, thoughts, and stories of those of us who are teaching during a pandemic? Let me give it a try.

I need to begin by stating a fact: I exist at the nexus of the height of individual privilege. I am a straight, white, middle-class male with tenure at a public university. I have a great deal for which to be thankful. I do not wish to negate that positional advantage by discussing the difficulties and struggles I have been having as an instructor in these times. In fact, I would like to acknowledge it here in the beginning because if I feel the way I do, I cannot imagine what people who exist at the perceived margins are experiencing.

For that reason, I want to write this essay for those like me, with privilege. One does not have to attend (though they probably should) a Black Lives Matter protest in order to recognize that feelings of alienation and isolation are not new to people of color. The exuberance that accompanies Supreme Court rulings that grant expanded rights to the LGBTQ+ community are evidence that not all of us experience politics in the same way. However, this moment of isolation is new to those of us who go through the world with the opportunities to pursue our goals and aspirations unencumbered by the weight of societal structures that pre-exist us, but are perpetuated by our actions. Rather than running out of our homes without a mask to the nearest restaurant, let us talk about how at this moment when we are scared, isolated, and feeling tenuous, we can learn, evolve, and create connection.

THE SETUP

For a glimpse into my perspective, I have to start by talking a little about myself. I, honestly, do not know if I should be writing about this. Given my positionality, it seems selfish and self-serving to discuss my privilege. However, I also hear a number of people in a similar position as me conflating acknowledging the advantages of privilege with somehow negating the fact that they have worked hard or experience difficulty. As a teacher in pandemic times, I want to be clear that I have worked hard and it has been difficult to

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deliver an experience that makes learning possible for my students. However, I must also acknowledge that there are social, cultural, and economic structures in place that work to benefit me and help put me into a position to navigate these fraught times. So, for those who do not want to hear from a person of privilege, I understand. Still, I do think there are people who need to hear what I have to say. My hope is that this essay contributes to the type of decentralization of power discussed by Patricia Hill Collins,¹ but I cannot claim to speak from any experience other than my own. So, I will try my best to navigate this space knowing that there are still things I do not know and have to learn.

With that in mind, I have to start this reflection with some discussion of where I was coming into the pandemic. When COVID-19 began to be recognized as a threat in the United States, I was already in a weird point in my career. I was (and still am) the associate professor of media production at a satellite campus of Purdue University in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In my position, I have been tasked with blending media production with a liberal arts mentality. Four years removed from promotion and tenure, I have been surely experiencing the swoon that it seems all associate professors seem to face.²

Like many others before me, since promotion and tenure, I have taken on a number of new and unique leadership responsibilities. To begin with, I started a Center of Excellence. What we dubbed “The Center for Collaborative Media” (the Center) was designed as a means to connect university resources, student experience, and community need. The initial thought was that we could respond to those requests that all art-based university programs get: “Do you have a student who can create an ‘X’ for me/my organization/my nonprofit (for free)?” The thought was, instead of sending students to do free work, unsupervised, we could connect with a community partner to create an opportunity for the student to be compensated for their time while also improving the quality of their work through supervision. An idea was born. However, it quickly expanded.

Only a few months into our new endeavor, the administration cut a program vital to our media production offerings: our college access television station. CollegeTV had been on our campus for over forty years and was serving our students well when it was shuttered. It was imperative to our program that it be resurrected, but the questions became *how* and *where*? How would we get the city, whose charter establish and grant funds that perpetuate the existence of the station, to trust us again? If that were possible, where within the university would management of the station reside? I guess it is not hard to see where I am going here. The Center, our newly established home for community connection and media production became the most likely target. Through some relationship building as well as the ability to show our sincere intention to educate and expand were necessary, we were able to return the station to our campus. However, this also meant the purview and responsibilities of the Center had to expand.

During this time, I also served on the Board of Directors for our local, not-for-profit, arthouse movie theater, Cinema Center. Cinema Center had been struggling for a number of years, in large part because of crisis of identity. Competing impulses to create something that could rival a multiplex while remaining true to its nonprofit mission had taken a toll on the finances. When the current executive director resigned, it was clear to the Board of Directors that the operating model had to change. In that moment, in what

could be characterized as either inspiration or naiveté, I offered up the Center as a potential partner to help. The Board graciously accepted our offer, with one caveat: I serve as a volunteer executive director until an agreement can be reached. When the pandemic rolled into our national consciousness in March of 2020, I had been serving as volunteer executive director for eight months, with no agreement in sight.

Importantly, I was never alone in these efforts. My chair, Dr. Michelle Kelsey, initially called together the group that brought CollegeTV back to campus. Dr. Connie Kracher oversees University Research and Innovation on our campus and has facilitated everything the Center has accomplished. I have been working with the Fort Wayne City Council, the Mayor's office, City Hall, and other local universities and colleges to coordinate CollegeTV. Cinema Center has an effective and knowledgeable staff that see to the day-to-day operations, including its senior curator Andrew Frieden and operations manager Tammara Cornett. CollegeTV has an excellent station manager in Brent Childers. Recognizing all of their contributions, it needs to be said that no one is more important than the associate director of the Center, Alix Watson. Alix is a producer and logistical expert without whom the Center could not function. This is just a small sample of the people who have made all of this possible. Possible is about to get much more difficult.

COVID-19 AND . . . TEACHING?

To reimagine a line from Hamilton, "The pandemic of 2020. Can we get back to pedagogy? Please. Yo." It is not novel to observe that everything related to teaching had to change during the spring of 2020.³ From kindergarten to college, COVID-19 had teachers rethinking content, classrooms, and policies. Distance learning was no longer just a complicated, viable option. It was a necessity. I need not belabor the point. We were all there. However, in the subtext of much of what we learned was that not all courses transition to a new environment as meaningfully as their instructors intend.

While I am probably not alone in thinking that it was particularly difficult to transition my courses from an in-person format to online, it was. During the spring of 2020, I was teaching both Introduction to Media Production and Film Production. These are skills-based courses with equipment and group interaction. It is ultimately quite difficult to teach the use of cameras, lights, and microphones without the ability to physically adjust cameras, lights, and microphones. On top of that, how were my students going to get the cameras, lights, and microphones needed to create their work?

Luckily for me, we had CollegeTV located right on campus, and what equipment could not be borrowed from CollegeTV was supplemented by University Research and Innovation. Dr. Kracher was committed to us being able to finish our courses. So, in March, we were able to send students away from campus with a basic equipment setup until the semester ended. For some, this was an easy pickup/drop-off scenario, but others had already traveled great distances home. This meant creating adaptable opportunities, being available one on one for creative fixes and consultation. It also meant reshaping assignments and guidelines. To many reading this, it sounds familiar. Given the

experience, I left that semester wondering if I really taught them what they needed to know. It sticks with me.

During that time, I asked a simple question: what if this continues into the fall semester? My interim department chair assured me that we would be offering courses in-person in the fall. I mentioned that one of the courses on the books for the fall semester was Television Studio Production. This is a course that requires, amongst many things, a *television studio*. This is not a course that could move online without dramatically rethinking its core objectives. I offered to switch to something, such as Scriptwriting, that could be moved online with greater ease. I was assured that we would make it work.

So . . . what does “making it work” look like? Our CollegeTV studio is a forty-by-twenty foot box with a control room about half that size. The irony there is, for the show to run, we need twice as many people in the control room for a production to work. The control room is long. On the far wall are the preview and program monitors that let people know what is queued in each input as well as what is on the air. Given the limitations of our technology, we have six stations in the control room: Director, Graphics, Video Server, Prompter, Audio Board, Audio Effects, and Producer. Ideally, the room would also include an instructor who is there in case something goes wrong. Social distancing? Not possible in this instance.

As the semester got closer, I became more insistent that something would need to be done if instruction were going to happen in that room. Station Manager Brent Childers became more insistent that something would need to be done if instruction were going to happen in that room. Associate Director of the Center Alix Watson became adamant something would need to be done if instruction were going to happen in that room. After months of agitation, our facilities team came to add clear shower curtains between the stations. Anyone who has ever owned a “clear shower curtain” knows that “clear” is more translucent than transparent when it comes to shower curtains. So, when someone would sit down at the audio board in the back of the room, there was no way to see the monitors that would signal to that person what audio channels were currently necessary for the show. Just before the semester began, we were able to procure some plexiglass to partially address the problem. As of now, and with the assistance of Brent Childers and Alix Watson, we are getting ready to record our first episode of the season. It was a great deal of work, but people were able to find work-arounds that made a limited amount of sense.

As an aside, at the same time courses went online in the spring of 2020, Cinema Center shut its doors. Those doors remain closed as I am writing this, and the Center has been tasked with continuing to fulfill its nonprofit mission as well as taking care of the staff through this period. Luckily, Alix Watson has been there to redirect the efforts of the people while I have sought out creative ways to make sure they are compensated for their time. We have found local partnerships and grants, and even procured a federal government Payroll Protection Program loan. To this point, not a single employee has been laid off or missed a paycheck. We do not have a plan to open any time soon. We have been quite fortunate.

WHAT IS MY TAKE-AWAY?

For those in my life who use the phrase “All Lives Matter,” I often equate their response to the Black Lives Matter movement to hearing a person cry out that they are injured and responding “We all hurt.” While it is true that we all hurt, some pain is more urgent and acute. However, in the context of this essay, it is also important to note that the pain being identified by Black Lives Matter is caused by other humans and is therefore addressable. We create the context and constraints that have caused Black Americans to feel as if their lives are worth less than others.

While I will never presume to understand the encompassing powerlessness of that feeling, I can speak to being told to go to work in the midst of a pandemic despite—days before the start of school—the Surgeon General visiting my city and telling us that we need to get our infection rates under control.⁴ This was hard, stressful work (remember, I bought a weighted blanket). However, I am also in the financial position to buy a weighted blanket to help manage. I exist within a system designed to help me continue. I have avenues I can pursue and enough power to feel comfortable advocating for myself. I work with a local nonprofit that was able to work with its Board to secure a PPP loan when many were denied access. At some point, in another essay, we can critique the capitalist assumptions that led to many bad choices during this pandemic, but my ability to navigate and manage the choices being made for me was a result of the people and structures around me. What I can tell you from my experience is that the only thing that has made my pandemic journey possible is that when I have asked for help, people have tried.

At this point, I should acknowledge that it would be both naive and speaking from my privilege to claim that “helping people” will “cure” the ills of U.S. culture. We need major structural changes to address oppression at the foundation of how our society operates. However, if COVID-19 has given me pause to reflect, it has affirmed for me that grappling with important issues like these is easier when people help me and allow me the time and space to write an essay such as this one.

If you are a person who is subjected to systemic oppression, I apologize if this essay comes across as obvious or condescending. As I discussed above, I strongly considered not writing it. However, it felt important to me to be able to acknowledge that, at this moment in time where fear and anxiety are prevalent, there are those who experience fear and anxiety on an ongoing basis.

I exist inside a context with options and opportunities that have made it possible for me to continue the things I hope to do. From the staff at Cinema Center to the other faculty at my university, we have found ways to benefit each other in the face of social and administrative pressures. I must also acknowledge that there are larger cultural and structural advantages that come from my position that I have not discussed or confronted here. I just felt that a straight, white man who is still employed during a pandemic needed to acknowledge that hard work and dedication are simply not enough—not now, not ever. This is ultimately what privilege looks like. It is a system of people working to their shared benefit.

When that system works to deny or marginalize people (any people based on any criteria), it becomes oppressive. This does not have to come in the form of an overt or deliberate action. If we are not working to change the system, then we are perpetuating it. It takes understanding this to change people's understandings of social programs such as Affirmative Action from "handouts" or "unfair advantages." What we are doing is making space inside the system for people who have traditionally been excluded. Equally as important is changing the impression that there is a finite amount of space in the world for success and we are fighting each other for our piece of it. As the representative anecdote, I can tell you that I would not be where I am without the benefits I have been granted by my connections to the people around me. Given that, I need to work more to create the connections others have not had. ■

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NOTES

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