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The existential threats of Covid-19

—— The case of low residency/distance learning graduate students ——

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Abstract

This essay explores various responses to the Covid-19 pandemic as found among students in low-residency/distance learning graduate programs at Nagoya Gakuin University and Goddard College Graduate Institute. It also considers our students' experiences in the light of other findings regarding the need for "a sense of belonging," and what has been called "an epidemic of loneliness" among students in higher education. Given that the Covid-19 pandemic seems likely to keep students in many countries separated from each other for some time to come, the authors hope to invite discussion of how we might create more interactive online forums for our students and help them achieve their goals.

Keywords: Covid pandemic, distance learning, sense of belonging, trustand learning community

新型コロナウイルスの脅威

—— 通信制大学院生の事例 ——

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“continuity is the exception in twentieth century America, and...
adjusting to discontinuity is not an idiosyncratic problem of my own
but the emerging problem of our era.”
(Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*)

Introduction: The Dawn of the Covid Era

If “discontinuity” was a problem gaining momentum in the 20th century, what can we call the unprecedented upheavals — the *chaos* — threatening economic, social, emotional and physical well-being or stability, in even the wealthiest of nations, brought by the 21st century Covid-19 pandemic? How can educators respond in positive ways?

Nagoya Gakuin University Graduate School, Japan (NGU), and the Goddard Graduate Institute, USA (GGI) both operate a low-residency model of education, with students coming to campus for some days each year, then returning home to work and daily responsibilities while submitting their studies via email and/or online platforms. So when in March 2020, Covid-19 panic grew worldwide, I guess most involved in this kind of education assumed we’d perhaps continue our usual virtual assignment exchanges with students, much as in previous healthier years. But we didn’t. There are several possible reasons; and while most may stem from the huge discontinuities wrought by Covid, some may also be found in recent — somewhat confusing — trends in student resilience.

As McGrath & Campbell (2016 & 2017a) found, unlike studies of purely online learning which have found dropout rates can be very high, our students have attested that NGU “schoolings,” and GGI “residencies,” provide much-needed initial *in-person* contact to help new NGU and GGI graduate students find a kind of home in the respective “shared cultures” of NGU and GGI — their “community” of learners¹⁾. As one Goddard graduate put it:

Unique as well is the sense of community on the Goddard campus, in the truest sense of the word. I don’t believe I’m alone in saying that coming to Goddard was the first time that I truly understood what that word meant, a feeling of being connected to every other person on campus, of being supported and held through my process, of truly belonging. (Britta Love, qtd. in Campbell, “Virtual and Place-based Culture”)

In 2020, though, the pandemic’s continued surges, at different rates, in different parts of the world, prevented both GGI and NGU from holding most of the usual in-person meetings for students.

1) For NGU survey results see: McGrath & Campbell (2017a); for GGI see Weil & Mirriam-Goldberg (Eds.) *Teaching Transformation* (to which many GGI students and alumni contributed their experiences).

Luckily NGU was just able to host its April 2020, 2-day Orientation for new students before Covid numbers surged. Still, with all of us masked (looking more like a bank robbers' convention!!), and without the Welcome Reception at which we usually chat with the new students in our department, it was hard to get a sense of the students as individuals. No doubt they felt the same about us, especially part-time faculty who rarely get to meet them again. Second or third year NGU students say they've continued to chat with each other via the *LINE* app, but some new students say they haven't felt so able to connect that way because they haven't really met each other for any length of time.

For GGI, February, 2020 was our last residency on campus so the new students who joined us in Fall had no chance to experience the place-based, in-person residency. Instead, they spent 8 days from noon to 9:00 PM on Zoom (scheduling begins at noon to accommodate West coast students). The difference between the in-person and virtual residency was palpable. New students couldn't causally meet other new/ 2nd year students, faculty, or staff over breakfast, lunch or dinner, or when simply hanging out in the 24-hour cafeteria — where much sharing of resources happens — so they didn't get the usual chances to make friends or feel themselves part of a supportive community.

As now it appears that the Covid threat will continue for a long time, it seems wise to take stock, and consider how we might mitigate some of the negative impacts on our students and institutions. This essay is an invitation to discuss options, but also to consider some of the more puzzling findings regarding student mental health that might exacerbate the different forms of disconnection Covid-19 has caused.

Living with the fear of contagion for 2 years, and in various levels of lockdown (depending on location) became not only stressful but distracting. Students were finding it hard to focus on their research — though not always able to articulate quite what was draining their attention. Then a number of students lost their jobs and were struggling to feed families, and/or find alternative work. Some became seriously ill with Covid, and/or lost family and friends — who died alone, increasing the guilt and grief of those left behind. Others found their workloads increasing as they had to make up shortfalls when their colleagues were “let go” amidst the economic precarity facing businesses. An MA degree — for a number of students — became a questionable goal.

For instance, an American student, whose job is busy at the best of times, had to take on extra work when her boss suddenly retired. This student studies disaster management but discovered her research findings were immensely depressing²⁾, and very remote from the focus of her day job. And

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- 2) A long-time disaster volunteer, dealing with PTSD herself, her research findings on inequalities of disaster responses, particularly in poor communities or communities of color, such as following Katrina in New Orleans, became yet another instance of institutional betrayal — the organizations for which she'd worked had betrayed her and other responders because they were guilty of allowing responses to be undermined by racism. This led to her doubting her own work as a disaster responder.

Covid kept pushing the possibility of a “return to normal” further into the future. She found she couldn’t continue.

A foreign student, studying in Japan, lost a close family member to Covid-19 but couldn’t return home for the funeral (a larger and lengthier event in her particular culture than in many others). Other Japanese peers faced family problems which were exacerbated by Covid’s forced separations. Another foreign student in Japan wanted to have her parents present for her baby’s birth but Japan wasn’t letting in foreigners so she and her parents ended up meeting in a 3rd country for the birth — though they had to go through expensive quarantine for two weeks on arrival there.

Some students began to miss assignment deadlines, and soon dropped out of either several classes, or completely. If Covid continues to prevent students from meeting and developing learning bonds with each other, we clearly need to provide additional supports to help them to reach their goals; of which more below.

We should also note that faculty and staff members haven’t been immune to the fears and trials that Covid-19 has been delivering. Some have become ill, lost family, friends, and often find their students need more individual support than usual³⁾.

Online/Low-residency Distance Learning v. In-person Learning: Recent Puzzling Findings

Numerous studies of purely online learning programs show retention jeopardized by students’ experiences of isolation⁴⁾. Covid has made isolation a disturbing factor across all age-groups (in many different nations) forced to study online; and innumerable international studies of the various effects, plus advice, have been appearing (e.g. Sundarasan et al., 2020; Irawan et al., 2020; Hasan & Bao, 2020; Arseneaux, 2021).

As distance learning educators already know, the need for a “Sense of Belonging” among online/low residency learners has also been a focus of study⁵⁾. More recently, however, a plethora of studies demonstrate that even campus-based, face-to-face learners are desperate for a sense of belonging to a supportive learning community (OpenLearn Create “Developing a Sense of Belonging in Online Distance Learning”). And of course Covid-19 has exacerbated these issues by forcing many children, students and workers to work online from home.

Whereas loneliness among the elderly has long caused serious governmental concern in some nations (“Campaign to End Loneliness,” UK; Fleming, “Sweden is Fighting Loneliness”) now

3) Campbell and Imani have had more requests (than pre-Covid) for phone/zoom meetings from students we’re supervising, both during and after the end of the semester.

4) See McGrath & Campbell (2016/2017a). *NGU Journal of University Research Institute*, 27(2); 28(2).

5) Ibid.

loneliness among traditional aged college students is a focus of attention. Psychologist and researcher in digital health, Danielle Ramo (2020), writes that even before Covid, loneliness was “a crisis” on US college *campuses*. Now, she says “it’s an emergency” and recommends a research-based free app, Nod, that was co-designed by young people for college students and might help them to develop and maintain friendships even when involved in online classes (Grit Digital Health).

The US Surgeon General (2014–2017), Dr. Vivek Murthy, has written numerous articles and a book on the “epidemic of loneliness” — a phenomenon he sees as a root cause of various social ills, and one that can intensify medical conditions. Drawing from various studies⁶⁾ of loneliness, Murthy distinguishes between isolation and loneliness, defining isolation as “the objective physical state of being alone and out of touch with other people” (*Together*, 2020, p. 9).

Loneliness is complex to identify because it is a subjective state *that can be experienced in the midst of many other people*. A 2017 study of 48,000 US college students reported that 64% said they’d felt “very lonely” in the past year (American College Health Association, Executive Summary, p. 13). A number of other studies find other equally daunting factors interfering with students’ ability to study and remain healthy (“Fact Sheet: Loneliness on Campus” provides a fairly comprehensive view of the literature).

The graduate students who attend NGU and GGI are not traditional age students going to college and/or away from home for the first time, so we can hope that they do not experience the loneliness identified among younger undergraduates in the USA. Our students often have their own families, after all. Nonetheless, an increasing number are or will be members of what is sometimes called “the iGeneration” (born post 1995, brought up with internet, then iPhones/smart phones and social media), who have been identified as suffering more depression, anxiety, loneliness, as well as avoiding adult responsibilities, and — counterintuitively — *of spending more time on texting or following social media than in-personal contact with either friends or family*. According to a long-term researcher on generational differences, this generation is “at the forefront of the worst mental health crisis for decades, with rates of teen depression and suicide skyrocketing since 2011” (Twenge, 2017, Ch. 1 & Appendices data). We might surely expect such students to be comfortable studying online and happy to avoid personal contact.

And yet, as GGI prepared to go into our second (Spring 2021) *virtual* residency, our younger students asked that we create more chances to socialize virtually with each other. We scheduled “hangouts,” Zoom or Kumospaces where students can “drop in” to chat — usually around mealtimes. Some generous alumni volunteered to facilitate the hangouts if needed, and to answer questions, or help students find library resources, and offer other needed advice. The new students of the Fall 2020 virtual residency asked us to pair up the new (Spring 2021) students with “old” students so that

6) E.g. Austin (1983); Hawkey et al., (2005); Cacioppo, Grippo, London & J. Cacioppo (2015).

each new student has a “buddy,” or student guide to whom they can turn when confused, or lonely. And rather than try to squash all faculty workshops and presentations into those 8 days — causing everyone “zoom fatigue” — we’ve been spreading some faculty, and visiting scholar presentations across the semester, hoping that this will help students to continue reconnecting after the virtual residency, thus providing a greater sense of community; but we doubt these efforts alone will be enough to bridge the in-person losses.

Low-residency students, like those in GGI and NGU, are physically isolated from each other during the semester more often than not and, while they probably try to mentally prepare for isolated study, as recent neuroscience reminds us, *learning is social; and emotional* (Siegal, 2012; Immordio-Yang, 2015, Immordio-Yang, Darling-Hammond & Krone, 2018). Learning happens when students are emotionally engaged “because emotion drives attention, which drives learning and memory” (Sylwester, in Brandt, 1997, p. 17). To be emotionally engaged students need to feel a degree of comfortable familiarity with their peers and faculty, and that they are supported so that they can take the risk of sharing their ideas, and having them responded to without fear of ridicule. If they can never meet in person, building such trust is a daunting prospect. Even if iGen’ers *are* comfortable not socializing, we surely shouldn’t be complacent about that trend for it doesn’t follow that they will learn, come to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, or appreciate academic integrity when isolated from peers with whom they may exchange ideas, and have their misconceptions (or worse, *misinformation so widely available online*) challenged in a caring atmosphere.

The two foreign students doing graduate work in Japan (mentioned above) though far from home, and distressed, quite amazingly managed to do well in their assignments for Campbell, but confessed to stress dogging them all the way⁷⁾. They and their classmates did say that online video meetings held later in 2020 allowed them express frustrations, and they enjoyed hearing their peers’ responses to the texts we were studying. They all asked that we schedule more video meetings in 2021; and although Japanese students were far shyer about sharing their opinions in English, they nonetheless appreciated the opportunity to connect. One suggestion was to ask students to prepare short presentations — as we would in face-to-face seminar classes — so Imani & Campbell have tried to provide more such options for 2021–2022. Anecdotal evidence suggests they have appreciated connecting in such meetings and, importantly, hearing their peers’ reactions to shared texts.

To offer a slightly different perspective, a Japanese colleague who is teaching regular university classes via Zoom explains that he tries to make his Zoom classes similar to face-to-face but points out the need to use the “break out room” function often, and that there are challenges when some students don’t turn on their camera. The advantage of the breakout function is that students are

7) One reported feeling depressed, and overthinking everything, though this was also exacerbated by job pressures.

mixed with other students with whom — in the classroom — they wouldn't normally talk. He also commented, "I feel they enjoy the Zoom classes similar to f2f. But I heard from some students complaints about asynchronous type online classes." It seems that having to watch pre-recorded video lectures or to read books and write a lot of reports is very stressful for some students (Imai, personal message). A number of GGI students, especially those who find that video meetings/pre-recorded video presentations threaten sensory overload, agree.

Interestingly, Campbell too, has found some students reluctant to turn on their camera and this has made communication rather more difficult to assess. In some cases, this could be because of poor wifi connections, but at least a few US students have said they feel uncomfortably exposed on camera, in part because they feel self-conscious seeing their own face on screen. Or perhaps they *do* prefer texting and using social media without being visible ... if that is so, where *will* they find the social and emotional connections so key to learning?

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