

An argument for asynchronous course delivery in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT: I argue that campus closures and shifts to online instruction in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic created an obligation to offer courses asynchronously. This is because some students could not have reasonably foreseen circumstances making continued synchronous participation impossible. Offering synchronous participation options to students who could continue to participate thusly would have been unfair to students who could not participate synchronously. I also discuss why *ex post facto* consideration of this decision is warranted, noting that similar actions may be necessary in the future and that other tough pedagogical cases share important similarities with this case.

Keywords: COVID-19, synchronous instruction, asynchronous instruction, Difference Principle, pandemic pedagogy

I. Introduction

In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities across the United States closed campuses and moved instruction online with surprising rapidity. Within a week of the University of Washington's closure on March 6, 2020 (M. Baker, Hartocollis, and Weise 2020), over 100 colleges and universities had done likewise (Quintana 2020). A month later, higher education in the United States had become a functionally online enterprise.

This change, which I shall call the *online shift*, occurred rapidly—often in a matter of days—leaving faculty little time to implement necessary course changes and essentially engage in pedagogical triage (Darvasi 2020; Dill et al. 2020; Schackner 2020; Tolley 2020; Wright 2020). Instructors with little or no online teaching experience were forced to radically redesign entire courseloads with little or no instructional support (June 2020; Dingel et al. 2021).

As I write these words during the summer of 2021, we are over a year removed from the online shift and only now beginning to process the events we have endured both personally and professionally as a result of the pandemic. In addition to scholarly reflections and autoethnographies describing our experiences¹, we have also begun more systematic reviews of our pedagogical decisions to determine how we can take the lessons we learned during our time teaching in a pandemic and apply them to our post-pandemic pedagogy.

One decision nearly all instructors faced in the early days of the pandemic was how the online shift would impact the synchronicity of their courses. In most cases, this involved asking whether courses that had been meeting regularly at an appointed time should continue to do so, or whether the circumstances of the pandemic entailed that we should shift to an asynchronous or blended model that would allow students to complete work at their own pace. I argue here that *ceteris paribus*, courses impacted by the online shift should have moved to asynchronous delivery for two reasons. First, the pandemic gave rise to circumstances that students could not have reasonably foreseen, and we should not have held them responsible for these unforeseen circumstances by requiring their continued synchronous participation. Second, providing blended options that allow some students to participate synchronously and others to participate asynchronously would unfairly privilege synchronous participants to the degree that a blended option would wrong students who had no choice but to participate asynchronously.

Before presenting my argument, I think it would be worthwhile to discuss choices we made in the early days of the pandemic, especially since we hope that

¹ See, for example, (Jandrić et al. 2020; Dingel et al. 2021; Jandrić et al. 2021).

circumstances like those will not repeat in our lifetimes. Even the evolving nature of the pandemic has caused our pedagogical choices to evolve. The circumstances that led to the online shift were generally not the circumstances we faced even a semester later, and as COVID restrictions continue to relax, our pedagogical circumstances become further and further removed from the panic of a year ago. Yet there is much we can learn from how we responded and how we ought to have responded to the online shift. COVID-19 will not be the last educational crisis we face in our lifetimes, and the reasoning and motivations behind particular pedagogical decisions may inform our decision-making in those contexts. For example, we may not face another pandemic, but an instructor may face a health challenge that removes them from the classroom for the remainder of the semester. Even if we are fortunate enough to avoid catastrophe, there may remain more banal circumstances that are similar enough to the considerations that motivated pandemic-related pedagogical decisions that we can either draw meaningful inferences from our pandemic pedagogy or identify how circumstances under consideration differ from pandemic considerations, thus understanding why pandemic-related conclusions would not hold.

Put somewhat differently, my choice of *ceteris paribus* conditions in my thesis plays an important role in two directions. I use *ceteris paribus* conditions in a similar manner to Cartwright's use of the term when discussing the role of scientific laws in explanation. Rather than taking the term at its literal meaning (other things being equal), I take the term to instead describe "other things being [just] right" (Cartwright 1980, 159). As conditions are more like the *ceteris paribus* conditions laid out in my argument, the conclusion is more warranted. As conditions depart from those described in my argument, the conclusion becomes weaker, perhaps to the point

where it no longer applies. Thus, we may face post-pandemic pedagogical choices that are relevantly similar to those we faced at some point during the pandemic—thereby justifying similar choices—and we may face choices that, upon reflection, are relevantly dissimilar. But for us to understand and apply these lessons, we must first examine our pedagogical choices—and their justification—in some detail. Thus, I think it valuable to examine this particular choice, even though we will hopefully not face these precise circumstances again.

My discussion proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the advantages of synchronous and asynchronous course delivery, though largely in the context of more-or-less regular learning environments, rather than those that were presented during the online shift. Section 3 presents my argument that because of the online shift, we ought to have shifted our synchronous courses to asynchronous delivery. Section 4 considers objections to my argument, and Section 5 presents brief concluding remarks.

2. Synchronous and Asynchronous Delivery

Course modality is pedagogically vital because of how much follows from how our material is delivered. For example, we will teach differently if we are onsite or online, in a lecture or a discussion, or if our courses are offered synchronously or asynchronously. Each mode of delivery presents strengths and weaknesses, and our pedagogy must be responsive to these factors. In normal times, decisions about synchronicity can draw on extensive research into these strengths and weaknesses. For example, flipped classroom models are predicated on the idea that many traditionally synchronous elements, like lecture, are more beneficial when delivered asynchronously, allowing class time to be dedicated to activities that take better

advantage of synchronicity (Daniel and Braasch 2013; Freeman et al. 2014). The online shift, while decidedly abnormal, can still be informed by many of these considerations. Thus, I discuss them briefly below.

Synchronous delivery involves content delivered and consumed simultaneously by instructors and students (Carlson and George 2004), for example via lecture, recitation, and group discussion. Importantly, synchronous delivery is distinct from onsite delivery (Bernard et al. 2004). As a result, there exists a significant literature discussing the strengths and weaknesses of synchronous delivery in an online or distance learning context².

Synchronous delivery is especially effective at creating shared meaning (Dennis, Fuller, and Valacich 2008; Dennis and Valacich 1999; Linebarger et al. 2005) especially when interpersonal understanding is a crucial course component (Dennis et al. 1998). Synchronous delivery also reduces transactional distance, the psychological and communications gap that exists between individuals interacting at a distance (Moore 1973; 1997). It does so by positively impacting three course features that promote or inhibit understanding: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. For example, dialogue is positively impacted via synchronous delivery's provision of meaningful collaboration opportunities (Park and Bonk 2007b), as well as immediate, spontaneous feedback (Park and Bonk 2007a; Falloon 2011). Regular meetings at which attendance is expected provide structure, especially when such meetings are a cultural expectation, as in the case of many traditional educational contexts where such schedules provide "guidance and comfort" (Lakhal, Bateman, and Bédard 2017, 14). Finally, synchronous delivery impacts autonomy by facilitating a community of

² See, for example, (Watts 2016; Lakhal, Bateman, and Bédard 2017).

independent and interdependent learners, improving the formation of common mental models (Linebarger et al. 2005), a sense of increased connection (McBrien, Cheng, and Jones 2009; Yamagata-Lynch, McGreal, and Conrad 2014), and a greater sense of cooperation (Strang 2013).

As philosophy instructors, it is not difficult to see the benefits of synchronous instruction, especially as it relates to increased communication and shared understanding. In addition to understanding shared terms of art and other philosophical threshold concepts like validity, utilitarianism, or warrant, we take understanding others' views to be a central goal of academic philosophy, even if—perhaps *especially* if—we do not share those views. This holds true at any level and type of philosophical practice, whether it is the professional philosopher responding to editorial feedback, a graduate student considering objections to their dissertation, or an introductory student struggling to understand why anyone would want to be a deontologist. Understanding what others say and their reasons for so saying is fundamental to successful philosophy, and given synchronous instruction's penchant for creating an environment where such virtues are likely to develop, it is no great wonder why synchronous instruction is commonplace in the philosophy classroom.

Asynchronous delivery occurs when course communication is not synchronized (Bernard et al. 2004; Carlson and George 2004). Thus, such delivery is not only the hallmark of traditional distance education; it also occurs to varying degrees in largely synchronous educational contexts. For example, homework, assigned readings, and labs are often used to deliver and reinforce materials, though we do not expect students to gather and read Descartes' *Meditations* together out loud. The primary benefit of asynchronous delivery is the flexibility and independence it provides,

allowing students to learn at their own pace, reflecting their interests and the particular circumstances of their lives (Arbaugh 2000; Maki et al. 2000; Tallent-Runnels et al. 2006; Zhang 2015). Asynchronous delivery also mediates how students process and respond to course content, for example by providing students space to form their thoughts more fully before responding in discussion and interacting with content at a deeper level than often occurs in synchronous delivery (Watts 2016).

Again, we can clearly see the benefits of this method of delivery in the philosophy classroom. In addition to workaday considerations about what material ought to be presented synchronously and what ought to be assigned as homework, we also want to encourage our students to engage deeply with the material. There may also be courses and contexts, such as introductory logic courses, where the benefits of synchronous instruction may simply outweigh the benefits of asynchronous instruction. Further, for many philosophy instructors, moral concerns surrounding issues like educational access motivate us to provide learning opportunities that are responsive to the individual challenges faced by nontraditional students, whose work schedules and family lives are often not only different from traditional students, but differ in ways that often prevent participation according to more traditional academic calendars.

Many of the concerns and motivations discussed above applied to some degree during the online shift. We still valued community and still hoped students would engage deeply with material, at least to the degree they were able. But the conditions of the early pandemic were so foreign to our usual pedagogical considerations that our normal considerations were overwhelmed by the particulars of the pandemic and the online shift. Indeed, the pedagogist Sean Michael Morris described our early efforts as

“panic-gogy” reflecting the feeling of panic instructors experienced while “trying to figure out what you could possibly do” (K. J. Baker 2020, 1) in these unprecedented circumstances. To revisit the idea of *ceteris paribus* conditions, the circumstances that gave rise to the online shift cast us far enough afield that we could not simply rely on extant research into the pros and cons of (a)synchronous delivery, and we were forced to ask ourselves how these benefits and drawbacks impacted the pedagogical circumstances surrounding the online shift itself.

Obviously, no research was available detailing how best to deliver one’s courses in the midst of a pandemic-induced online shift, and we were ultimately forced to make decisions under uncertain, crisis conditions. As Morris said when discussing panic-gogy, we were forced into an environment we did not fully understand. As I argue in the next section, this uncertainty and the unanticipated nature of the crisis had important pedagogical and moral implications for how our courses should have been delivered in the aftermath of the online shift, making asynchronous delivery a moral imperative in most cases.

3. Asynchronous Delivery and the Online Shift

My claim that we faced an obligation to offer courses asynchronously in the aftermath of the online shift rests on two further claims. First, our students did not register for our classes under the conditions they found themselves in following the online shift, nor could they have been reasonably expected to have foreseen those circumstances. Second alternative delivery methods like blended courses that would have provided a synchronous option for students who were able to take advantage of such delivery would have unfairly penalized students who could not participate synchronously for

reasons beyond their control. Together, these claims argue that because students could not have anticipated circumstances that would have prevented their synchronous participation, an asynchronous option would be necessary to meet these students' needs, and because bifurcating the class into synchronous and asynchronous tracks would put asynchronous students at a disadvantage, synchronous delivery ought to be abandoned.

3.1. The Pandemic Could Not Have Been Reasonably Foreseen

As instructors, we reasonably expect students to meet basic logistical requirements, like access to required technology or the ability to attend course meetings, because these requirements are made explicit at the outset of the course. For example, course meeting times are communicated upon registration, and the need for a word processing program will be included in the syllabus. Thus, instructors may penalize or refuse accommodation to students who are unable to attend a particular class meeting or turn in a handwritten paper because we expect students to make informed choices with respect to their own learning.

In the pandemic's early days, this expectation that students make informed choices vis-à-vis their learning could not have held because of the unexpected nature of the pandemic and the rapidity of the online shift. The online shift typically occurred in a matter of days, either in the middle of the semester for semester-based institutions or just before the beginning of Spring Term for trimester-based institutions, after students had registered for courses. This shift could not have been reasonably foreseen by students as they registered for classes. The pandemic represented a once-in-a-century public health emergency whose nearest analogue is

the 1918 flu pandemic. Suffice to say that none of us in higher education impacted by COVID-19 were part of the educational enterprise when that pandemic hit.

To put the point simply, we as instructors faced stress, burnout, panic, and a host of other responses to the online shift because we could not have anticipated such an event impacting our classrooms, and if *we* could not have anticipated the pandemic, it is hard to see how we could have reasonably expected our *students* to have anticipated it.

Further, the online shift was not merely an unanticipated shift in course delivery, but also the general closure of campus and the resources campus life afforded, like computer labs and ubiquitous, reliable Wi-Fi access. The resulting educational impact was limited for students who were able to seamlessly transition to an online environment at home, where privilege and circumstance allowed them to work without interruption or additional responsibilities being placed on them, but not all students were so fortunate. Reinforcing the observation that the digital is now primarily experienced by its absence (Jandrić et al. 2018), many students returned home without computers or reliable internet access. Other students found they were expected to care for vulnerable family members like grandparents or younger siblings (Ray 2020), faced food insecurity (Lowe 2020) or unforeseen financial pressures (Levin 2020), or were now expected to contribute financially to their households in a way that was not expected pre-pandemic (Hoge 2020). Very briefly, many of our students lives were profoundly disrupted, to the point that one professor described the “bizarre but utterly believable Rube-Goldberg-esque way [a student’s] life had been turned upside down” (Sachs 2020).

These factors conspire against successful synchronous learning, especially when they intersect and are presented to the student more or less immediately. Normal workarounds that would have permitted synchronous participation, whether technological or interpersonal, were not available. One could not find a babysitter to care for younger siblings when public health messaging dictated that nonessential contact should be eliminated to mitigate disease spread, just as going to the library to take advantage of public computers or free Wi-Fi was similarly off the table. Asking students to return home in the name of public health and then requiring students to engage in activities that were being publicly discouraged or simply prevented is deeply problematic. Doing so does not shift moral responsibility for disease mitigation from institution to student as much as it abdicates moral responsibility on the part of the institution by essentially saying that while the institution will not provide an environment where the coronavirus can spread, successfully remaining a student at said institution may require you to participate in activities that place students and those they care about at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

Such abdication is especially problematic when alternative delivery methods, like asynchronous delivery, exist to at least mitigate and perhaps eliminate many of these barriers to successful participation. Asynchronous delivery was able to do so. Consider the student who must drive into town to get a reliable data signal or who must oversee their younger siblings' online learning during school hours. Such students' synchronous participation will at best be significantly impacted by such requirements. They must spend class in their car—hardly an ideal learning environment—or share an internet connection with siblings they are actively caring for. By contrast, eliminating any requirement that students be present at a particular

time, students were able to access course material on essentially equal footing with one another. Students whose care obligations or internet access would have prevented synchronous participation could access material as parents returned home from work or as less strain was placed on home Wi-Fi networks.

Asynchronous delivery in this case functions as a sort of accommodation for students whose circumstances have drastically changed. Under normal circumstances, we happily make accommodations for students whose circumstances similarly impact their ability to successfully complete a course, for example because of an unexpected hospitalization. While we could make asynchronous delivery available via accommodation for students who request it, three factors make such a strategy inadvisable.

First, the instructional logistics of the particular circumstances make managing individual accommodations problematic. In the midst of the online shift, managing who is entitled to what pandemic-related accommodation while simultaneously managing the total shift in one's courseload and other factors like the pandemic's effects on one's own life is simply onerous. A more straightforward approach like a blanket shift to asynchronous delivery can provide some degree of simplicity to complex circumstances.

Second, accommodations are often more effective when they are not accommodations per se, but rather built into the design of a course in a way that makes genuinely accommodating students unnecessary. For example, a common accommodation provided to students under the Americans with Disabilities Act is time-and-a-half on exams. But if exams are designed to be untimed, the accommodation disappears because all students may take as much time as they would

like. Students unaware that they would benefit from an accommodation will nevertheless receive the benefit, and neither the instructor nor the student is required to take actions to provide the benefit beyond normal participation in the class. Following the online shift, asynchronous delivery provides such a course design; students need not ask for accommodation because the accommodations that would be provided to students unable to participate synchronously are baked into the course itself.

Finally, we cannot assume that students who face the kinds of challenges outlined above are willing, able, or even aware that they may discuss their circumstances with us. For example, first generation students are significantly less likely to seek help from instructors and peers out of a desire to remain self-sufficient and avoid burdening others (Chang et al. 2020). Thus, even if no student explicitly appeals for an accommodation, we cannot assume that none of our students face circumstances that prevent their synchronous participation. Given the sudden, unprecedented, unforeseeable nature of the online shift, we ought to be especially sensitive to the fact that at least some of our students' lives were profoundly disrupted in ways that impacted their ability to successfully complete a course and which they were not prepared to discuss with us as their instructors.

Overall, the unanticipated, unforeseeable changes wrought by the early days of the pandemic and the online shift profoundly impacted some students' ability to participate synchronously in courses. Because these impacts were unforeseeable, it would be unfair to hold students responsible for their circumstances by continuing to require synchronous participation. Thus, fairness dictates that we should have offered

students an option to complete the course asynchronously in the aftermath of the online shift.

3.2. Blended Options Unfairly Privilege Synchronous Students

If my argument above is successful, it follows that we ought to have shifted to some form of asynchronous delivery during the early days of the pandemic. But it does not follow from that argument that *only* asynchronous delivery would have been appropriate in the aftermath of the online shift. For that conclusion to hold, it must be the case that other forms of delivery, like synchronous or blended delivery, would be impermissible.

The argument that synchronous delivery is permissible is neatly dealt with, given that the need for asynchronous delivery argued above entails that synchronous delivery—with no other delivery options available—cannot be permissible. However, blended delivery options, where synchronous and asynchronous elements of the course are combined, are not so easily ruled out. In this case, such a blended option would roughly include two tracks where students who are able to participate synchronously may do so, while students who are unable to participate synchronously may complete the course using an alternate asynchronous track. For example, instructors may hold regularly scheduled meetings at which lectures are given or discussion is held, and those meetings might be recorded and uploaded to the course learning management system. Such an arrangement might seem especially appealing given the benefits synchronous delivery can have for community building, particularly in a crisis that caused communities to instantly grind to a halt.

I argue in this section that such a two-tiered approach to delivery would have been impermissible in the aftermath of the online shift. I do so by applying Rawls' Difference Principle to the circumstances of the online shift and arguing that a two-tiered approach to course delivery would have violated the Difference Principle because the benefits of synchronous delivery would not be available to all and the inequalities that would result would not be to the benefit of the least advantaged students.

Similar arguments have been advanced for other pedagogical choices, like whether to offer extra credit (Pynes 2014), though such arguments typically trade on more nebulous concepts of fairness, rather than a more formal analysis of principles like those offered by Rawls. While I hold that general fairness concerns may be sufficient to defend my position here, my hope is that a detailed analysis can more precisely articulate why synchronous instruction should have been avoided which may also, as discussed in Sections 4 and 5, help clarify the degree to which the conclusions of my argument apply beyond the circumstances I consider here.

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls frames the Difference Principle as follows: "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all" (Rawls 1999, 11). He refines this principle somewhat in *Political Liberalism*, writing that "social and economic inequalities attached to offices and positions are to be adjusted so that, whatever those inequalities, whether great or small, they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society" (Rawls 1993, 6–7). The principle justifies the existence of inequalities on the grounds unequal societies can

make everyone better off than purely egalitarian societies, though it restricts such inequalities to those that are, in some meaningful sense, available to all.

As a toy example, doctors are provided social and economic advantages relative to most other members of society, but the Difference Principle would permit these advantages because they will increase the number of doctors in a society. Having more doctors in a society will make the entire society better off by improving the quality of medical care available to all. Assuming that everyone has the opportunity to become a doctor in some meaningful sense, we as a society may allow doctors to benefit from certain economic and social advantages that not everyone has access to.³

While Rawls' principles were aimed at establishing the contours of a just political society, it is not difficult to repurpose them so they can be applied to other settings where individuals create policies and procedures governing group behavior. For example, we may use the Difference Principle to better understand the justness of certain course policies as easily as we can employ it to analyze the justness of laws. "Only naturally red-haired students may resubmit essays" seems unfair for precisely the same reason "Only naturally red-haired individuals may be President" seems unfair; an inequality exists because not everyone is entitled to a benefit (i.e., the ability to resubmit or be President), and *whether* one is entitled to the benefit is due to circumstances beyond an individual's control. Indeed, features like one's natural hair color seem to be exactly the kind of features agents in Rawls' Original Position would be ignorant of precisely because knowledge of such features would tempt agents to

³ This toy example, of course, elides a great deal. For example, it takes for granted that the presence of doctors specifically makes the worst off in society better off, as called for by Rawls' version of the principle in *Political Liberalism*. Any policy decision or social arrangement would obviously take much more analysis than can be offered in a single paragraph when weighing it against the Difference Principle; the goal of this example is merely to sketch the broad outlines of when a social inequality would pass muster.

create social rules to the advantage or disadvantage of members of that group, rather than making a particular advantage available to all.

My argument against blended delivery options in the aftermath of the online shift rests on a similar claim. Given the circumstances of the shift itself, the advantages of synchronous delivery would not have been available to all students. More importantly, the reason why at least some students would not have been able to take advantage of synchronous delivery would have been for reasons Rawls would have ruled out as beyond the particular agent's control.

Here, let us grant the idea that synchronous delivery would be, at some level, beneficial. Indeed, let us assume that a blended option would benefit students who are able to participate synchronously and have no corresponding penalty for students participating asynchronously. In other words, asynchronous students would be able to complete the class no differently than they would have been able to if the instructor had simply chosen to implement a purely asynchronous course. At this point, we can apply the criteria within Rawls' principle. First, does an inequality exist? We have supposed, *arguendo*, that it does—synchronous participation is more advantageous than asynchronous participation. Second, does this make the society in question (i.e., the class) better off than a society without this inequality? Again, our supposition tells us this is true. The synchronous students are better off, while the asynchronous students are, as we have assumed, no worse off. Thus, the lot of the society as a whole has improved. Finally, is access to the benefit tied to positions open to all members of society? Here, I argue, the answer is no.

In many cases, whether one would have been able to take advantage of synchronous options would essentially come down to luck. To see why, consider two

reasons why a student may have been forced to abandon synchronous instruction for asynchronous instruction following the online shift. First, consider the student who has been told by their parents that they must care for and supervise younger siblings who are also now forced to learn remotely while parents work. Second, consider the student whose internet connection is now unreliable either because of bandwidth concerns or because they must travel to use the internet. There are, I believe, other circumstances that might be considered, but these two should suffice to show how students' lives have been changed by forces beyond their control. In both cases, it is worth considering two questions. First, *why* are students in the position they find themselves? Second, what would it mean to ask students to choose in these circumstances?

To answer the first question, the students in our two cases find themselves in their present circumstances for reasons beyond their control. They did not choose to find themselves in a pandemic, nor did they choose to have their universities close and switch to remote learning. But beyond that, they also did not choose to find themselves in the circumstances that make synchronous learning impossible. No individual has any meaningful say as to whether or not they have siblings, nor do they have control over their parents' work schedules or attitudes about how care ought to be provided to their children. Students who can attend synchronously because they have no younger siblings, because their parents are able to work from home and supervise their children, or who have a grandparent who can easily come over and watch children did not work for or earn those circumstances. They are, from the perspective of the student, a matter of pure chance.

Similarly, students do not get to decide the bandwidth of parents' internet plans or whether internet is even available in many cases. In some cases, parents are simply unable to afford high-speed internet plans necessary for online streaming and videoconferencing. In others, one's physical location (e.g., many rural locations) may simply mean that no high-speed network is available. Again, these circumstances are a matter of chance. No student chooses their parents' economic circumstances, nor do they choose where their parents live. And while there are some students who are able to become financially independent or move out on their own even when not in residence at college, this is not the case for many traditional-aged college students who depend on their parents for support.

Turning to the second question, we can now ask what it would mean for students to be asked to choose under the sorts of circumstances outlined above. Essentially, to do so would involve asking students in our first case to choose between synchronous participation and care for other family members. In the second case, it would involve asking students to take extraordinary steps to have internet access reliable enough to participate synchronously. In both cases, it seems, the constraints on students' actions are such that it is difficult to say that students have a choice in any meaningful sense.

In the family care case, the immediacy of the need and the consequences of failing to meet that need are potentially dire. For example, a much younger sibling may simply be unable to care for themselves or go through the day without supervision; to leave them alone in such circumstances would be genuinely dangerous. Thus, students are essentially forced to choose between synchronous participation and perhaps placing their siblings in danger. This is ultimately no choice at all. One could

argue persuasively that it is not the student's fault that they are in this circumstance and that parents simply dictating that older siblings must care for younger siblings is an abdication of parental responsibilities, but none of that would change the student's calculus that, given the circumstances they find themselves in, they must either participate synchronously or care for their siblings.

For students whose upended circumstances have made internet access impossible, their choices are sometimes similarly dire. If a student has returned home to a rural area without broadband, they must travel each day to participate in class synchronously. For students whose economic circumstances mean they cannot afford sufficient internet access, their options are to decline synchronous participation, pay for a service they cannot afford, or travel to a public access point. It seems obvious that if a student genuinely cannot afford internet access, we cannot expect them to purchase it. Absent emergency loans, one presumes that student financial aid has been disbursed and largely spent, especially given that the online shift occurred near the end of the academic year. Thus, it would be difficult to say that students have a genuine choice with respect to synchronous participation in that case; their choice is to participate asynchronously or add an unanticipated expense they cannot afford to be able to participate.

The idea that we can reasonably expect students to travel to access publicly available internet *after* they have been sent home in the name of public safety has been discussed at length above. It represents an abdication of responsibility on the part of institutions to say they have no choice but to send students home in the name of public health while simultaneously maintaining that students who lack reliable internet access must venture out into those same conditions. If colleges and universities have

no choice but to send students home, then they cannot claim that students have a choice to venture out.

If what I have argued above is correct, then for some of our students, synchronous participation is not a meaningful option for reasons that are beyond their control. In other words, given the circumstances surrounding the online shift, at least some students would have no choice but to participate asynchronously. Thus, considering a blended option, which we have supposed would provide a benefit to students who are willing and able to participate synchronously, requires us to ask whether students who are forced to participate asynchronously are being wronged. I believe a straightforward application of Rawls' Difference Principle shows that they are not only wronged, but wronged in such a way that blended options ought not have been offered in the aftermath of the online shift. Not everyone is in the position to pursue a particular benefit, so the resulting inequalities fail to satisfy the principle's requirements of justice. This analysis does not even consider who is more likely to find themselves in the sorts of circumstances discussed above, for example that care responsibilities often fell on first-generation students, working class students, and students of color (Morabito 2020) or that broadband access is especially challenging in tribal areas ("2018 Broadband Deployment Report" 2018). If we take Rawls' admonition in the principle's *Political Liberalism* formulation that inequalities must especially benefit the least advantaged, the concerns raised in this section become even more salient.

4. Objections and Replies

If my arguments above are correct, then in the aftermath of the online shift, we as instructors had an obligation to shift our instruction to asynchronous delivery. For some of our students, the circumstances they found themselves in during the early days of the pandemic would have justified an accommodated course structure permitting asynchronous participation, and the benefits of synchronous participation that would have accompanied blended delivery options are unfair because they would not be available to all students in a manner consistent with Rawls' Difference Principle.

In considering these arguments, it is clear that several objections could be made and are deserving of a response. Because I take many of these objections to be potentially applicable to multiple parts of my argument, I consider them separately here.

Objection: The arguments above fail to consider a further option that students may simply withdraw from their courses. Many universities have policies that allow for one-time, no-questions-asked withdrawals or provided such options following the online shift. Thus, students who could not participate synchronously could have chosen to withdraw and re-enroll when their circumstances permitted them to participate synchronously.

Reply: While such policies were often available to students, the idea that a blanket withdrawal would have constituted a meaningful choice for students depends on viewing the consequences through a purely academic lens, rather than a holistic lens that takes all of a student's circumstances into account. For example, federal financial

aid provided by the US Department of Education is inextricably tied to student enrollment such that eligibility for aid requires continuous enrollment at a certain credit threshold (“Am I Eligible to Receive Financial Aid?” 2018). Dropping below that threshold after aid has been disbursed entitles the government to demand the return of previously disbursed aid (“Staying Eligible” 2018).

Given when the online shift occurred, it seems reasonable to assume that much, if not all, disbursed aid had long since been spent on tuition, books, and other educational needs. Thus, students faced a choice between continued enrollment or losing credit for work already completed and the expense of returning disbursed and already spent aid. Just like the student forced to “choose” between sibling care and synchronous participation or the student forced to “choose” between finding public internet access and synchronicity, telling students that they may take advantage of the benefits of synchronous participation by dropping their courses, paying back financial aid, and re-enrolling later hardly seems like a meaningful choice.

Objection: There is something about philosophy that makes synchronous participation irreplaceably valuable. The benefits students take from synchronous discussion cannot be replicated by asynchronous participation and without them, it is difficult to see how my course could have been successful.

Reply: One can easily understand the motivation behind this objection, even if it is ultimately mistaken. In my experience, having taught synchronously and asynchronously for over a decade, synchronous courses just *feel* different. In a discipline like philosophy that is often built on discussion, synchronous courses are

where I feel like I am engaging with my students in philosophical conversation. While analogues exist for asynchronous courses, for example via message boards, engagement can feel forced and less genuine. Frankly, if I had my druthers, I would prefer to exclusively teach synchronously. But none of this entails that philosophy courses cannot be successful when delivered asynchronously or that the difference in quality between synchronous and asynchronous delivery is so great as to render the latter pedagogically out of bounds. After all, asynchronous philosophy courses were not invented to satisfy the needs of the online shift, and such courses have long been taken to provide an acceptable level of philosophy instruction.

Even if one ignores the benefits of asynchronous instruction, like increased accessibility and the ability to engage more thoughtfully with course material, philosophy not only can, but regularly does happen successfully in an asynchronous manner. Indeed, much professional philosophy is done thusly; one does not write articles or monographs in the presence of one's interlocutors, for example. Thus, the question is not whether we would lose something by eliminating synchronous instruction, even for a time—I am willing to grant that we would. The question is rather whether asynchronous instruction can provide an acceptable level of philosophical instruction. Given our collective attitude towards asynchronous courses for decades preceding the pandemic, it seems clear that we view such instruction as at least acceptable.

Objection: The circumstances laid out in the arguments above are not unique to the online shift. Students continued to face challenges related to care, access, and affordability throughout the pandemic, and some will continue to face similar

challenges after the pandemic has subsided. For example, some students with disabilities are unable to participate synchronously for reasons beyond their control. Thus, if we take these arguments to their natural conclusion, we ought to continue purely asynchronous courses into the future, perhaps indefinitely.

Reply: Though I agree that challenges faced by students beyond the pandemic reveal inequalities that we are morally obligated to address in the name of equity of access, I do not take my argument to entail the continued requirement that courses exclusively be offered asynchronously. Indeed, I do not take my argument to even extend to subsequent pandemic-influenced semesters. In other words, I believe we should have concluded the Spring 2020 semester asynchronously, but I do not think my argument shows that even the Fall 2020 semester should have been a purely asynchronous endeavor. With limited exceptions—like the University of North Carolina’s bungled response necessitating a second online shift in the Fall 2020 semester (Flaherty 2020)—the circumstances students faced in the fall were materially different than the ones they faced during the online shift.

Perhaps the biggest difference between the online shift and subsequent semesters lies in the amount of time students had to consider alternatives and explore their options. There seems to be a meaningful difference between telling students they must choose right now between caring for siblings and participating synchronously and telling students that several months from now, synchronous participation will be required. As I have argued above, the former case hardly represents a meaningful choice, while the latter case provides time for students, family, and universities to come up with alternative options that would render synchronous delivery permissible.

For example, my institution partnered with the YMCA to provide a learning space for children cared for by members of the university community where they could be dropped off and supervised while synchronous learning took place. Similarly, many institutions addressed digital access issues by providing mobile hotspots at no cost to students. In such cases, it seems as though students could meaningfully decide whether they wished to participate synchronously or not, and their meaningful choice entails that synchronous participation was an option open to them. In addition to students needing time to decide whether to take advantage of such options, programs like these take time to set up. In the immediate aftermath of the online shift, childcare arrangements and mobile hotspot programs were not available, and if they were not available, they obviously were not options that would have made synchronous learning possible.

Similarly for students who face analogous problems for non-COVID reasons like disability, the lack of immediacy surrounding the decisions individuals and institutions need to make would entail that options aside from asynchronous delivery would be permissible. For example, institutions can and should provide accessible classrooms, live captioning, and other services that promote access, and I grant that institutions have broadly not satisfied this requirement. But unlike the online shift, where the available responses to shutting down campus and moving all instruction online were quite limited, the tools available to us in response to ongoing, systemic problems are much wider. Thus, while asynchronous instruction may plausibly address longstanding inequalities, it need not be our *only* response.

Objection: Some synchronous delivery options, like virtual office hours, are discretionary in the sense that students may, but are not required to, participate. Such options could have been permissibly implemented for all students.

Reply: Certainly, we may have been able to implement some course features with synchronous elements permissibly. Office hours seem like a clear case, given that they are not required and are also quite flexible. However, two points bear examination with regard to such features. First, whether things like office hours count as synchronous delivery in the sense meant throughout this discussion. Second, whether such features count as course delivery.

Regarding questions of synchronicity, it is obvious that activities like office hours constitute synchronous interaction between instructors and participating students. If I am in my office (or on Zoom) discussing a concept with a student, we are doing so synchronously. However, it is much less clear whether this synchronous exchange counts as synchronous instruction in the sense discussed throughout this essay. Synchronous delivery is generally taken to be the delivery and consumption of course content by the entire classroom community, or at least, a meaningful subset, rather than simply holding a synchronous discussion with a single student or even a small group. As Carlson and George define synchronous instruction, it “describes the ability of a medium to create the sense that all participants are concurrently engaged in the communication event” (2004, 192).

Suppose, for example, that I teach a very small seminar with five students. Further suppose each student visits me in turn during office hours, where we discuss the same subject. At the end of this series of discussions, we may say that each of my

students has discussed the material, but it is intuitively implausible to say that we have had a synchronous class discussion because nothing we would recognize as “the class” was concurrently engaged. Indeed, if it had been, I would not have needed to have the discussion five separate times!

Regarding whether something like virtual office hours would even count as course delivery, let us again consider our hypothetical small seminar. Typically, resources like office hours are not avenues through which course delivery occurs, which is in part why office hours are viewed as purely optional. Thus, if a student were to go an entire semester without availing themselves of an instructor’s office hours, it would be difficult for the student to somehow claim they had been shortchanged. This is not the case with even optional synchronous meetings because these meetings are aimed at content delivery. One can see this, for example, by examining how such meetings are planned and structured. While office hours are often unstructured outside of a vague invitation to discuss topics that are on students’ minds, other synchronous meetings are designed around specific topics, for example by lecturing about them or having structured discussions. One ought never go into a class meeting with no idea of how the class will unfold, content to let students bring up topics as the spirit moves them or sitting in silence if nothing comes up, but we are happy to do this during office hours because office hours do not constitute delivery in the normal sense.

Objection: Synchronous and asynchronous delivery are merely different pedagogical tools one may employ. The argument presented above seems to essentially rule out one beneficial tool when it would be more appropriate to let circumstances dictate

which tool is most appropriate. Given the benefits of synchronous delivery, we ought to employ it if doing so will be beneficial.

Reply: Much of the substance of this objection is dealt with, I think, via consideration of the Difference Principle earlier in this discussion. I therefore take this objection as invoking potential fringe cases where such concerns perhaps do not apply. For example, let us again consider my hypothetical small seminar. It is possible to find oneself in a seminar where because of the size and the comfort of the participants sharing their circumstances, the instructor can be reasonably confident that all students are able to participate synchronously. Unlike concerns raised above where students may face significant challenges that would prevent synchronous participation which they are unwilling or unable to discuss, my example here supposes that such challenges are not only absent, but reasonably believed by the instructor to be absent. In such cases, the objection goes, why would we remove a tool like synchronous instruction when it may benefit the class?

At one level, my response is to simply grant the objection. If an instructor could have been reasonably confident that no students faced circumstances that would have prevented synchronous participation, that instructor could have maintained synchronous delivery following the online shift. In this way, we might think of my conclusion as a sort of defeasible *pro tanto* obligation, rather than a blanket obligation to engage in asynchronous delivery. But at another level, it seems important to consider the sorts of *ceteris paribus* conditions assumed by my argument.

Considering the size of most classes effected by online shift and how well we know our students, it seems clear that for the overwhelming majority of courses, we

simply did not know enough to be able to reasonably assert that no students would have been affected and that synchronous instruction could have continued as usual. Thus, other things being equal, our courses should have been delivered asynchronously. Such a claim is analogous to Friedman's thesis that the social responsibility of corporations is to maximize profits (Friedman 1970). While closer examination of Friedman's claim reveals that his maxim is more properly interpreted as requiring agents to enact the will of principals, he explicitly takes motivations other than profit maximization to be fringe cases rare enough that they do not fall under his *ceteris paribus* conditions. Similarly, I grant that each classroom is its own community, and there may be communities where access has not been impacted or where synchronous instruction satisfies Rawls' Difference Principle. But based on what it would take for a particular classroom to clear that bar, I would argue that such cases are rare enough that we may exclude them from the standard conditions to which my argument applies.

5. Conclusion

It is tempting to say that, as infection numbers decrease and vaccinations increase, we are returning to normal. But to say we are returning to normal is in some sense to say that we are returning to how things used to be and that there are no lessons to be learned from our experiences during the pandemic. This ought not be the case, however. Our personal and professional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a profound effect on our pedagogy, and these changes—as well as what motivated them—should lead not to a return to how things were, but rather the

creation of a new post-pandemic normal that is more responsive to student needs and experiences.

A crucial part of this creative process ought to include deeper understanding not only of the decisions we made, but also why we made particular decisions and how, with the benefit of hindsight, we ought to have responded. None of this, I stress, need include reprimand or blame. I'm willing to venture that each of us made pedagogical choices that we wish we could take back, and the pandemic represented a truly unprecedented educational emergency for everyone involved. We were all fumbling our way through rapid changes to our personal and professional lives. But the fact that we ought not hold ourselves blameworthy does not remove our ability or obligation to reflect on what we should have done, since understanding what we should have done can better prepare us for difficult decisions we will face in the future.

I have argued above that in the light of the online shift, we should have immediately shifted synchronous courses to asynchronous delivery because of the unanticipated, unforeseeable challenges the pandemic presented to students. The result of these challenges entailed that some students would have been entitled to asynchronous instruction and that the assumed benefits of synchronous instruction would no longer have been available to said students in a way that would satisfy Rawls' Difference Principle.

Even though we are now over a year removed from the online shift, my argument is worth considering for at least two reasons. First, though we hope that additional rapid shifts to close campus and move instruction online will not be necessary, we cannot rule such decisions out. The emergence of coronavirus variants and the experience of campuses like the University of North Carolina, where classes

had to again be cancelled for the Fall 2020 semester in the wake of a rapidly spreading on-campus COVID outbreak, tell us that we should be prepared for a range of possibilities.

Second, even if we are fortunate enough to avoid future online shifts, we will continue to face decisions that share important similarities with the circumstances of the online shift. For example, universities still have significant progress to make regarding access for students with disabilities, who find themselves disadvantaged or unable to access benefits for reasons beyond their control. Individual students regularly face circumstances like diagnoses, job loss, and so forth that I have argued here should have led to a shift towards asynchronous instruction because we expected students to be so affected. Achievement gaps can largely be traced to disparities in opportunity, for example via economic challenges, not having resources to understand the hidden curriculum, or overt discrimination. Following the online shift, we faced choices about course delivery for semesters that continued to be impacted by the pandemic.

Understanding the nature and degree of similarity between the circumstances of the online shift and the circumstances present in other cases can both help us better understand a range of options open to us when circumstances dictate and also help us draw distinctions between cases, allowing us to understand why a response might be appropriate in one circumstance, but not another. For example, the range of responses available to address accessibility concerns may make asynchronous instruction permissible but not obligatory to address student disability. Similarly, we may point to the time students had to consider their options when registering for future semesters as presenting a more meaningful choice for students than the immediate demands of

the online shift, thus permitting synchronous instruction for those able to participate. But at least in circumstances where we faced a wholesale shift in course delivery brought about by circumstances beyond anyone's control, where those circumstances can reasonably be expected to thoroughly upend some students' ability to continue to participate synchronously, fairness dictated that we should have taught the remainder of our courses asynchronously.

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