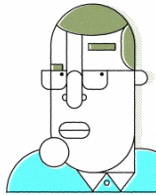
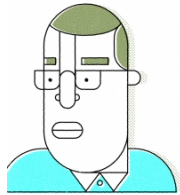
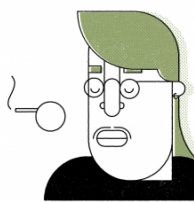
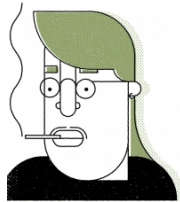


A Side Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic? Reading Got a Lot Harder

By Emma Pettit | APRIL 20, 2020



Margaret Chapman wanted to know how her students were faring after her institution, Elon University, shifted to remote learning. When the dust settled, she sent a survey to the students in her course on women, gender, and sexuality studies.



The feedback was united: Ditch the textbook. We can't focus on it.

That didn't really surprise Chapman. "Neither can I," she thought.

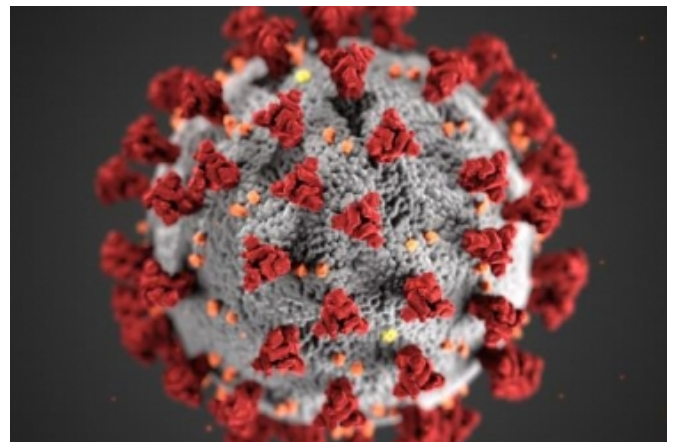
Dale Edwin Murray

Typically, Chapman, a lecturer in the English department, has no trouble parsing dense texts. But since the Covid-19 pandemic shifted into high gear and higher education entered fully into emergency distance learning, Chapman has observed a change in herself. She notices she has trouble concentrating on student papers. She can no longer submerge in an argument and wade around. Even a beach read at the end of the day cannot hold her interest.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall
- How the Coronavirus Will — or Should — Transform Graduate Education **PREMIUM**
- Historical Archives Once Silenced Marginalized Voices. Now Pandemic Archivists Want Them to Be Heard.



She isn't alone. Lots of people, it seems, are struggling to stay focused on the written word. (Are you still here? Good!) Other college instructors have expressed an inability to read at the breadth and depth that they're used to. Personal productivity has plummeted. And that's fine, they've decided.

Maybe some saw social distancing as their chance to crank out research proposals or write the next *King Lear*. Shakespeare wrote the original during a bubonic-plague outbreak, quipped a viral tweet. But some instructors already weathering an imperfect semester are satisfied with just staying afloat. Their recent struggles, they say, have made them more empathetic to the ways their students are struggling, too.

Can't Read, Can't Think

Instead of ditching the textbook entirely, Chapman decided to assign shorter chunks. She's sending her students podcasts and videos instead of more texts to read. She started giving feedback on papers over Google's meetings platform rather than writing it down.

Chapman says she initially restructured her courses around what she could reasonably ask of her students in this context. Now she's taking time to think about what she can reasonably expect of herself.

Chapman is also trying to talk about, with her students, the general weirdness of life right now. In 2001, Chapman was a web designer for Duke University's English department. She remembers listening to professors discuss how they should behave in class after the September 11 terrorist attacks. And she remembers students' being "really freaked out" by instructors who didn't at least acknowledge that enormously disruptive event.

She learned a lesson: Acknowledge strangeness. Don't be like that meme where a dog sits in a burning house under a curtain of smoke, saying, "This is fine."

Monica Fuglei said she learned a lesson a few weeks after her institution, Arapahoe Community College in Colorado, flipped the virtual switch. Fuglei, chair of the English department, had to steer that transition from home. This semester, Fuglei is also enrolled in a course at Arapahoe. But after the announcement that the college was going remote, Fuglei set her course reading aside and, well, forgot about it for a couple of weeks. When she returned, she found herself skimming and having to reread passages because they just weren't sticking.

That experience informed how she treated her students. She thought, How can I transfer the maximum content with minimum reading? She has moved away from assigning a reading one week and discussing it the next. Instead, she and her students are returning to a text — like Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" — again and again. She's encouraging her students to revisit rather than read once and move on.

Fuglei said she had known the research about how stress decreases a person's ability to learn, but suddenly, in her own life, it was visceral. She understood that if a student put her course on the backburner of his life, it wasn't personal. Everyone feels discombobulated. She noticed that colleagues were beginning emails with apologies for not being able to communicate clearly.

“We can’t read. We can’t think. We’re having difficulty communicating. It’s all the profound effects of stress,” she said, “big or small.”

Living Through History

Seth Matthew Fishman started social isolation with grand plans. An assistant professor of education and counseling at Villanova University, Fishman thought he’d have time to read professionally and personally, revamp his exercise routine, perhaps do some home repair, and learn a language.

“Pretty much none of that’s happened,” he said.

Instead, Fishman has found ways to do what he jokingly called productive procrastination. He managed to move a course called “Campus Physical Environments” online, somehow. But his own reading and research agenda flew out the window. It didn’t take long to ratchet down from his “grandiose” notion that he’d submit five conference proposals this year to thinking he’d finish one or two, maybe.

He’s just not as motivated about his own scholarship. For one thing, some of it seems irrelevant in light of Covid-19. Researching phased retirements? No one wants to hear about that right now, Fishman said.

He’s also in a privileged position, he said. His job is teaching- and service-oriented. It’s nice to have research, he said, but no one is going to care if he gets an article out next year as opposed to two years from now. So he’s fine supporting his students as well as he can from home, alongside his cat, Dobby, and letting the rest go for now.

Lisa Yaszek is also trying to be kind to herself. These days, the last thing the professor of science-fiction studies wants to do is read more science fiction. She already feels as if she’s living through a disaster, Yaszek said. She doesn’t need the excitement of somebody else’s.

Of course, she said, some might find comfort in dystopian stories, like E.M. Forster’s “The Machine Stops,” about a world where society lives underground, reliant on a giant machine to provide its needs, and the machine breaks down. The parallels are obvious.

Lots of science fiction is inherently optimistic, said Yaszek, who teaches at the Georgia Institute of Technology. It’s about the possibility that people might put down their differences and work together. Reading those narratives can feel discomfiting right now, she said, because when you’re done, you return to this imperfect world, where people are making imperfect choices.

Yaszek hopes she can read those stories and novels again someday. Right now, she’s preoccupied with home-schooling her son and helping students in her course in science fiction and fashion, some of whom are now designing “plague fashion.” She’s also devouring the news while trying to limit her own informational intake.

“It takes a lot of energy to live through history,” Yaszek said.

By the time the Covid-19 pandemic rolled around, Bradley Simpson had experience with letting life's expectations fall by the wayside. A few years ago, his son died of brain cancer. Simpson was a complete wreck, he said. It shattered his ability to concentrate, obliterated his professional identity. He questioned the time and effort he'd spent being a hyperproductive scholar, chasing the brass ring.

Simpson, an associate professor of history and of Asian and Asian-American studies at the University of Connecticut, said he had talked frankly with his students about what he was going through, asking for their patience and forgiveness for not being fully present. He also became more sympathetic to their circumstances, whatever they were.

The past four weeks have felt like a less-intense version of what he went through, Simpson said. He's obsessed with the news, and spends the rest of his time focused on his family and his students. His reading ability has declined exponentially.

But that's OK. He said he's more concerned with his students, who are dealing with a host of personal problems. He told them that their No. 1 priority should be taking care of themselves and their families. Whatever you have left to devote to class, that's great, Simpson told them.

He's calling this the *Nailed It!* semester, after the Netflix reality show where shoddy home-bakers try to concoct masterpieces with basically no time. They nearly always fail. Simpson said he feels as if colleges asked their instructors to create the equivalent of an elaborate cake in two hours' time. Professors end up showing students a version that looks as if it melted in the microwave.

The overall picture is going to be a mess, Simpson said. All we can do is hope that we got the buttercream frosting right, he said, and that it tastes OK.

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