

# The Jean Brierley Lecture on College Teaching

## THE PANDEMIC PROFESSOR: SOME REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING IN THE ERA OF COVID 19

Ellen Fitzpatrick  
Department of History  
University of New Hampshire  
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Thank you Lige and President Dean for your kind and generous words. I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to the Faculty Awards Committee and the Provost for this wonderful honor of the Jean Brierley award. My thanks to Catherine Overson and the Center for Excellence and Innovation in Teaching and Learning, as well, for hosting this event. I wouldn't be here today or even at UNH without the Department of History. I owe whatever I've achieved in the classroom to my wonderful colleagues, our devoted staff and my engaging and good natured students – past and present, undergraduates, graduate students and graduate teaching assistants alike. It's my students who have made me a better teacher. I'm very certain that over my career I learned more from them than they ever learned from me. On this point, I'm reminded of the exchange Kevin Hart and Snoop Dogg had when they covered the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and offered commentary on the equestrian competition. "Do the horses get a medal when they win?" Snoop Dog asked. "No it goes to the person on the horse," replied Hart "which," he added, "should be CHANGED." Snoop agreed. The rider didn't do anything but "stay on for the ride." I feel pretty much the same. For forty years, I stayed on for the ride as my students ran and won the race. So kudos to them as I walk away with this accolade. Thank you as well to my Dean in the College of Liberal Arts, Michele Dillon, and the many members of the university community who have been so supportive to me in my years at UNH. Special thanks in this regard to our IT and Academic Technology group, the incomparable former COLA geeks – and especially the amazing Dee Ann Dumas who kept me running. To Cliff Brown and the AAUP, my gratitude for your efforts on behalf of the faculty. I had a rather peripatetic academic career before coming to Durham which at least had the virtue of giving me a basis for comparison in judging academe. And it is truly the case that I have never encountered a more generous, kindhearted and

welcoming academic community than the one I found here. So I thank you, again, one and all, for these past 25 years.

Truth to tell, it's been my great good fortune to have spent most of my life in the realm of colleges and universities. I grew up in a college town, the daughter of a teacher and a professor, Mary and Bob Fitzpatrick, who conveyed to their children that life was all about learning and teaching. They showed us by example the rewards of mastering books and intellectual puzzles of all kinds and the pleasure of sharing with others whatever captured our imaginations. One of the strategies my parents employed in raising six children, I can see in retrospect, was to urge the oldest to teach the next one down and so on through the ranks. In this way, we were all teachers in miniature as soon as we could walk and had mastered such essentials such as getting dressed or putting our shoes on alone. I learned so much from my sisters and from my brother - Maureen, Mary, Bob, and our two late sisters, Betsy and Jean - in this and every other way.

Education thus was truly bred in the bone. From very early on, even before I set foot in first grade, the rhythms of my life followed the school calendar. The new year always began in September with the first cold snap of fall when woodsmoke filled the air, and the students returned to the university. Homecoming parades and bonfires lit October nights. Our trick or treating as children had as a backdrop the revelry that spilled out from warmly lit faculty homes and oversized fraternities into darkened streets. The winter brought ice skating at the Amherst College rink, then a simple frozen oval outdoors where you could twirl around and around staring up into a sky full of stars or at snowflakes falling down softly upon our reddening cheeks. Spring was a revelation each and every year when in a second or so it seemed, everything blossomed at once, especially the young men and women who reappeared on college greens. Heavy snow boots tracking mud, salt and sand gave way to sneakers, loafers and topsiders. By

May, as lilacs scented the air, the students were packing up to leave. Summer seemed a deadly dull and endless season – its long, lazy days relieved only by the excitement of family vacations at the beach. It’s all bucolic, of course, only in my memories. They grow sepia toned now as each passing year separates me further from these earliest impressions of life and academe – the two so deeply intertwined in my own personal history.

These memories provide a sharp contrast to my experience and to yours, I’m sure, over the past two years. We’ve carried on in our university community through a pandemic that has turned upside down the atmospheric and sensory pleasures of campus life as well as our old familiar ways of teaching and learning. For this reason, I wanted to devote my Brierley lecture to some reflections on this recent time - perhaps an odd choice for a historian who dwells most comfortably in more distant domains. However, the pandemic is the elephant in our classrooms of late and it seems appropriate to acknowledge its impact not only on our common endeavor but on our age. The statistics are mind numbingly familiar. Yet they still bear repeating. As of today, the pandemic has killed more than 5 million people around the world, a minimum according to recent metrics. In the United States, despite our nation’s wealth and access to vaccines, nearly a million Americans have succumbed to the virus. More than 70 million across the nation have contracted Covid 19 as well as hundreds of millions worldwide. With such devastating loss has come unanticipated and overwhelming challenges to states and societies, institutions, families and individuals in every corner of the globe.

The costs of the pandemic and its many burdens have not been distributed equally. In fact, existing social, racial and economic inequities have been accentuated and further exposed by our struggle with Covid 19. In the United States, for example, about a third of American workers started to work remotely in March of 2020 as the coronavirus spread. This was not an option for

the other two thirds of the U.S labor force. Several thousand health care workers have lost their lives or become sickened themselves saving the lives of others. Those who have not died or become infected live daily with the exhausting threat of exposure which is, for them, routine. Front line workers, many of them people of color and immigrants to this country, have had to show up at what are among our lowest paying jobs, in order to keep our economy functioning and the rest of us cared for and fed. The rapidity with which the coronavirus spread, flattening the norms of everyday life, disrupting schooling, and imposing social and psychological isolation has been shocking. Equally sobering are the ripple effects that are likely to impact all of us and nations around the world in years to come. Speculation abounds as to what the pandemic's long term impact will be on economy, state, society, politics, medicine, public health, global affairs, education and all of us in the ensuing years. This much is certain; we have lived through an historical event of immense proportions that will take its place among other scourges that have shaped the course of human history. To date, the Covid 19 pandemic ranks 5<sup>th</sup> among the worst plagues and epidemics ever seen. We are reminded here in the twenty first century yet again that modernity and all the scientific and technological wonders of our age cannot erase our essential vulnerability as human beings. It's been a humbling experience however one may wish to deny that reality.

As professors at UNH we have been extremely fortunate to have worked at an institution that has responded briskly, responsibly and often heroically to the threat of Covid 19. With a state of the art testing lab, clearly articulated and mandated protocols, and forthright efforts to address the specific needs of this community, we've navigated well the tension every educational institution has faced between staying open and protecting its students and employees. No place has achieved this perfectly. And I do not wish to minimize even slightly the difficulties any

member of our staff, faculty or student body has endured over the past two years. But by way of contrast to our situation in Durham, consider the email I received recently from a friend of mine from graduate school - a professor at another university – whom I had not heard from in many years.

After warm greetings and an initial exchange of pleasantries, he wrote: “Things here are awful. Our governor is truly evil, and the university’s president is fully compliant with the governor’s insane edicts and mandates, delegating the deans and associate deans to act as the enforcers of hitherto unimaginable policies. The university has virtually no pandemic protocols; COVID-19 infection rates are not made public; we hire political hacks to the faculty on the instructions of the governor; and dissenting faculty members are urged to leave. . . There is a ferocious assault on academic freedom, and phrases such as "social justice" and "critical race theory" are forbidden. . . .Junior colleagues are terrified, while senior colleagues are mostly angry. We are required to teach face-to-face, and students are not required to be masked or vaccinated. . . .My colleagues teach in a petri dish.” I know many of us harbor the latter concern given the state’s prohibition against vaccine mandates. It’s a risk we share with workers everywhere and a gnawing worry that saps the spirit and one’s energy. Amid it all, however, foresight, skill and determination have allowed this university to weather the pandemic thus far without jettisoning our standards and core values. Or so it appears to me.

Teaching amid the pandemic has nevertheless posed unique challenges for even the most experienced professors among us. Covid 19 has been a great leveler in that regard, leaving the wizened and the green equally perplexed about how to proceed. I’m thinking of one of my young colleagues who started her career during the pandemic. Imagine the conditions extant since the spring of 2020 as your introduction to college teaching. What a trial by fire and yet how

brilliantly achieved. The fact is that the most scrupulous institutional planning and procedures could not prepare us as professors for the essential question we faced during the pandemic whether we entered our classrooms via a computer screen or face to face donned in protective gear. How do we teach? The *science* of it, in some sense, remained the same. We know our fields of expertise, the material we need to convey, and how to structure courses that effectively prepare our students to progress and succeed. It is the *art* of teaching that has felt attenuated – as if instinct abandoned us and left us searching for what once came more naturally.

By way of example, let me explain how jumbled up all this became for me during the pandemic, stressing that I am well aware that my colleagues, especially in other disciplines, undoubtedly experienced things differently. First, a brief summary of what for me normalcy dictated. Somehow from my very first year of college teaching - I have no idea how - I arrived at a core principle from which I have never strayed. Simply put and meant metaphorically it is this: *Meet your students where they are*. This didn't mean tailoring the history I was teaching to the fashions of the day. The content of the courses, the body of knowledge being taught was fixed and predetermined. It didn't depend on who showed up on any given day. Rather, this was about figuring out how best to engage my students in historical study. The great challenge, of course, as you first encounter the diverse students sitting in front of you in your classroom, is to figure out: *where are they?* It's not always easy to discern but it's the sweet spot I've always aimed for and that I think is important to effective college teaching.

This fundamental is based on a corollary I grasped pretty early on – maybe because I started my career as a young woman teaching at a women's college. And that is that if you keep at this business, you are going to get older and the students sitting in front of you are never going to age physically. Their perpetual youth is deceptive, however, in one critical way. Generations

change. As the years go on, the young people you encounter arrive with frames of reference, prior educational experiences, parental guidance, family influences, passions, concerns, and ways of thinking about the world and their place in it that don't necessarily resemble those of their predecessors. One ignores this fact at considerable peril to your teaching – at least in the field of history. The jokes I told when I taught at Wellesley College in 1980 don't fly at UNH in 2022 – sad for me as that might be. The cultural references of *my* own youth are Greek to my students today. Once you figure out something about who your students are – where their interests lie, how they think, and what they already understand – it becomes much easier to discern how to teach best what you want them to know. No matter how great our mastery of our disciplines, it's important, in my view, to think about how to reach your students if you want to succeed. Otherwise you'll lumber in looking like the dinosaur you may, alas, have already become. And while dinosaurs are very popular among toddlers, twenty year olds, at least in this respect, have usually left their childish interests behind.

When I came to the University of New Hampshire in 1997, I must confess that I found it challenging to read my students. My prior teaching experience was extensive but it had all been in private institutions populated not entirely but to no small degree by fairly economically privileged young people. Not all but many of these students exhibited a high degree of confidence in their own ability and their likely future place in society. A few were quite conscious of institutional hierarchies and made no secret of their lack of deference to junior faculty. I was 27 years old when I entered this realm and had a pretty good sense from my own undergraduate experience and from graduate school what made these particular students tick. At UNH, however, I found my students revealed less about themselves at least initially or so it seemed to me. They were also quite diverse, despite the superficial appearance of demographic

homogeneity. When that first term was over, and I sat down to read my teaching evaluations, I learned something else really notable about my students at UNH. Those who liked the course seemed thankful for what they learned. Those who were less enthusiastic seemed more forgiving. No one compared me unfavorably, as had a student at my prior university, to one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century and found me wanting. My students at UNH employed criteria rooted in the here and now. I finally understood that they didn't give a lot away in their expressions, in part, because they were listening.

In time, I did get better at reading our students at UNH. This involved, especially in our large American history survey course, continually scanning my student's faces throughout the lectures I delivered each week. I had done the same throughout my prior teaching experience. I found I could gain from their expressions some sense of whether what I was saying was getting through or if I should pause and repeat or rephrase my point or perhaps offer a better example to illustrate some theme. And this is where things went South during Covid 19. The masking required for face to face teaching upended this process for me. It has been said that the eyes are the window to the soul, but it turns out the mouth is pretty important too. I found it much harder to read my students when their faces were masked. I am sure, for those who were trying, it was also hard for them to read me.

As I suspect is generally true, I got used to the masking and found other ways of assessing my students' level of understanding and engagement – slouching or sleeping are dead giveaways, by the way, in case you haven't noticed. I pretty much gave up on reading faces. From the bridge of the nose up, we all looked vaguely pernicious. It seemed more fruitful to involve my masked students in other ways. Instead of talking about FDR's fireside chats during the Great Depression, for example, or his 1933 inaugural address, I added audio clips to my

PowerPoint. It's never bad to hear, especially these days, Franklin Roosevelt's aristocratic voice saying, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." I'd been doing more of this sort of thing in any case in recent years largely because many college students today are visual learners. They've grown up in a media saturated world and this has shaped their ways of knowing. That can pose challenges for us historians. Nonetheless, I faced the fact quite a while ago that I was going to have to retool my teaching to reach these kids. I dropped the carefully crafted 50 minute lecture and the notes I'd labored over during long nights at my desk for years and began to teach through PowerPoint.

The pandemic, however, necessitated further tweaking. I really tried hard to make some of those PowerPoints sing. I spent hours finding compelling images and matching background colors to enhance their design. I searched high and low for relevant video clips to embed in the slides. I also wanted to bring to fuller life those we studied as a way of injecting further zest and energy to our classroom experience. I added news footage showing civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, along with some video in which activists reflected back on their experiences as young adults living through the violence. It seemed to help my students to see and feel the passion that animated those we studied. These folks had also lived through great previous challenges in our nation's history. Our predecessors came out on the other side, and so, I wanted to convey, would we.

Interestingly, one of the paradoxes of pandemic teaching was that it introduced me by fiat to a new form of instruction that I have found to be very rewarding. I know many of you feel differently. But I've found remote teaching over Zoom quite fascinating. It's a highly effective platform, in my view, for teaching history. For one thing, Zoom actually enhanced my ability to read my students in the seminar setting. The Zoom gallery allowed me to see every student in a

highly individuated way throughout every single seminar meeting. The ancillary information one acquired – a poster of Che Guevera on a dorm room wall that would have been commonplace forty years ago was surprising to see in 2021 - or a teddy bear visible in the background as well as the occasional non stuffed animal significant other – these things were newly visible to me.

The bits of personal data were far less significant, however, than the fact that I felt as if I was in a one to one relationship with each student attending. They seemed very much focused on what I was saying - or at least they tried to be - having few alternatives as they stared face forward at their computer screen. We still had excellent discussions, with robust participation. And during most seminar meetings, I'd send the students to breakout rooms where they could interact and discuss in small groups the topic of the day without me. When we reconvened, I could see their spirits rising. But the distractions present in a classroom of normal, restless twenty years olds who are often hyper aware of each other, for reasons having little to do with history, were absent. A lot is going on very often in college classrooms beyond what's being taught and learned, including the behavior of the idiosyncratic few who that can divert both the other students' attention, and mine, from the business at hand.

There were occasional oddities, to be sure, on Zoom. It's one thing to have a student nodding off sitting at their desk in a classroom. It's another when they fall asleep in their pajamas, in their apparently cozy bed in full view of the rest of us, thereby provoking envy among those, including me, who might wish to be similarly attired and napping. It's an interesting paradox, I think, that in the zoom classroom students often feel deprived understandably by their isolation from their peers. Being among your fellow students is such a normative, crucial and fun part of the college experience. I suppose it is unworthy of me to confess, however, that it's *advantage professor* in this scenario as one doesn't have to work

quite so hard to keep your students focused. Overall, I found the Zoom seminar format to be very engaging as were the students in my remote classroom.

Teaching a lecture course over Zoom, on the other hand, presents still other challenges. The size of these classes with over 100 students and the fact that I can't seem to master using multiple monitors forced me to set aside my efforts to pay close attention to my students faces while I'm lecturing. And much to my amazement, given all I have just said to you extolling the importance of such an approach, I found this remarkably liberating. In the pre-pandemic age there was always the danger in such a focus that you might over-read their expressions or worse yet, misinterpret entirely what they were thinking. It's easy to misjudge when you're fatigued, under personal stress, or just out of sorts on any given day. I certainly made those mistakes. The issue became moot, however, when I had to teach the large lecture course over Zoom. Using PowerPoint and a single monitor meant that I could see my slides, myself and perhaps 5 out of 125 students who popped up in the gallery randomly. Under these circumstances, paying too much attention to the few students I *could* see proved distracting, especially if one of the five was yawning. It was too much multi-tasking for my increasingly limited capacities. So like the actor alone on stage emoting to a darkened theater, I decided to go on faith and just belt it out the best I could, come what may. These two examples capture, I hope, the paradoxical character of teaching during the pandemic, for me at any rate. Each presented new challenges which I have found both vexing and surprisingly stimulating. I guess the takeaway is that even in a pandemic, college teaching is a pretty great undertaking and I have felt lucky to have been able do it in both the best and worst times of my life as well as more recently in our existence on this planet.

It has, I think, been a very moving aspect of this experience that as professors we've been joined to our students, our families, our friends, and our communities by such a basic, raw, and

even primitive imperative. Namely, trying to live through and survive the pandemic. In preparing this talk, I asked my colleagues' if they would share what they found most challenging and what they felt they had learned from teaching under these circumstances. Several echoed a sentiment I share thoroughly. "I've learned to be more forgiving and tolerant," one said, "trying to meet students where they are at the moment." Another noted, "I think I have always been fairly patient and empathetic, but I have ramped that up incredibly after so many conversations with grads and undergrads." "I find that I'm a nicer –less critical and perhaps analytical grader," one colleague mused, "because I worry more about the psychological impact of a low grade." Each of these comments reveal that amid the fear, frustration, irritation, anger and exhaustion we've all experienced to some degree over the past two years, something else has arisen. The *opportunity* at least exists to tap into a deeper level of compassion from our shared suffering as human beings in the era of Covid 19. In this time of terrible division in the United States and around the world, we'd do well to embrace it.

I wish I could offer some wisdom about what lies ahead for college teaching in the post pandemic era. I'm mindful of my limitations in this regard as a historian and of my wonderful department chairman's quip when we were discussing an apt slogan, we might use to persuade students to join us in the study of history. Kurk Dorsey suggested: "how about 'We predict the past?'" We are, indeed, good at that and I feel reasonably confident in saying that undoubtedly norms will be reestablished and the pleasures of campus life will return. But in ways large and small, we've all been changed by what we've lived through. It's part of our story, our lived historical experience, and as long as we have memory that won't wash away. Hopefully the world will build on knowledge gained and our teaching will likewise be enriched by our own deepened personal understanding.

In that vein, I'd like to end today where I began back in Amherst, Massachusetts with an early childhood memory. When I was perhaps five or six years old, I remember seeing my father receive an award at the University of Massachusetts. I'm hazy about why he was being honored but I do remember the ceremony took place in the evening. In my mind's eye, I can still see him striding across a football field in a floodlit stadium. What truly excited me was that I was out at night! It was thrilling! Today, on what is for me a very special occasion, the warmth of that memory lingers. And it is very gratifying to know as I near the end of my career, that I was able to carry my parents' commitment to teaching and learning forward at this university – a place I first heard of as a football rival to the home team. So I thank you again for this award and for the privilege of being a member of this distinguished faculty.