8 Strategies for Teaching F2F with a Mask and Creating Caring Classrooms

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Within the next few weeks, faculty like me in the U.S. will walk into our face-to-face classrooms with masks on. It is likely that faculty with accommodations to teach online this fall, or whom work at universities that temporarily shifted to fully-online instruction, will need to teach F2F with masks next year as COVID-19 declines but treatments are still in progress.

Aside from mask-wearing in Asia even pre-coronavirus, this will likely be the first time for faculty in the U.S. to teach while masking, no matter if we are new faculty or have taught college students for decades. Faculty developers who teach faculty how to teach have never done this before, nor is there scholarship of teaching and learning on this topic. This unchartered teaching territory on top of the fear of contracting the virus is daunting.

However, there are strategies and experts to leverage for effectively teaching F2F with a mask. I am a tenured Associate Professor of Communication Arts and the Director of the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at a university. My field of communication and colleagues in allied disciplines like theatre and dance know how to mobilize nonverbal strategies and images. Furthermore, interdisciplinary studies of women and gender, public health, and inclusive pedagogy—all of which are central to my work as a scholar, teacher, and faculty developer—have already advanced useful theories and solutions to related issues.

Listed below are some overarching challenges and specific strategies for overcoming them included in a training that I designed and am facilitating called “Teaching F2F with a Mask and Creating Caring Classrooms.” I am also personally putting these into practice in preparation for my first day of teaching F2F with a mask next week.

**Masks hide our faces and emotions**
With a mask on, faculty and students lose the ability to interpret and use facial expressions to emote. Research in communication and psychology reveals how the face is a primary means for communicating emotions. As a result, a classroom with a teacher and students wearing masks might feel like it does when interacting with someone with a blank facial expression—emotionless, strange, confusing, or even a subtle sense to stay away.
To bring emotions back into the classroom, faculty could conduct a “temperature check” with emojis at the start of each F2F class like K-12 teachers often do. The instructor and students choose an emoji to display on the projector how they feel in that moment. The teaching that day could then be adjusted to the feelings in the room.

Since eyes, eye lashes, and eyebrows are still visible above a face mask, then faculty could adjust them to “smize” (smile with your eyes) similar to supermodel Tyra Banks who coined the term “smize” when directing other models to express with their eyes.

Masks dehumanize and medicalize the classroom
In part because they hide faces and emotions, masks can dehumanize. They can lead us to perceive someone as less than human or as an object. Hence the biased belief that someone with a blank facial expression is strange. What’s more, dehumanization and medicalization often go hand in hand. Medicine has a history of objectifying people as specimens and some healthcare practices make it worse, such as how protective gear covers up a doctor’s sadness. Add this context to how many lay people are now wearing masks like those worn by medical professionals, and the college classroom could resemble a hospital.

While masking, faculty can humanize the class and themselves by displaying a picture on the projector of themselves without a mask on. Students should show pictures of themselves not wearing masks so their professor and peers see them as human, too. This aligns with a best practice in online teaching for instructors to make welcome videos that humanize the teacher whom the students will never meet in person.

Teachers could wear a mask with an aesthetic design or logo on it that symbolizes their personality. Colleges are selling masks with university logos on them for this reason, as well as most major clothing brands make masks now. Otherwise the classroom might seem sterile if you wear a white or blue surgical-looking mask.

Masks stifle speech and sound
Masks filter the virus along with speech and sound. Since lecturing and discussion are fundamental pedagogies in higher education, then masks can fundamentally restrict teaching and learning. The inability to hear becomes even more a problem in larger classrooms, as well as mask-wearing is an accessibility concern. Students who are deaf or hard of hearing can no longer read lips when masks conceal mouths.

For centuries, rhetorical scholars have studied public speaking, including vocal aspects of delivery. Theatre faculty are masters of this skill as well. For example, an acting professor at my university advises faculty to focus on pacing, pitch, articulation, and volume with breath support in order to clearly communicate and connect with students when speaking with a mask.

Dancers remind us that we can use nonverbal body and hand gestures when teaching with a mask, too. Watch how a dance professor at my university even draws on American Sign Language, which preschool teachers often do. As she says, the teaching body has to be a lot bigger to communicate when masking.
Offices of disability and access services at universities should purchase clear masks for faculty to teach deaf or hard of hearing students who request that accommodation.

Masks divide us
According to the news, mask-wearing has become politicized in the U.S. That claim assumes masks can be neutral, which is not the case since they hide our faces and emotions, can dehumanize and medicalize the classroom, and stifle speech and sound. Besides, face masks are, by design to prevent viral transmission between humans, a barrier between ourselves and other people. They divide us. This division runs counter to the relational bonding between college students and teachers that research shows positively correlates to student success and learning.

To build relationships in the classroom and commit to each other’s well-being by masking, faculty could apply feminist care ethics and inclusive pedagogy to co-create with students a Caring Class Constitution the first week of the semester. Invite students to envision a caring class. Ask students to share what caring students were like in previous college courses, both inside and outside of the F2F classroom. Ask if they ever had caring teachers before, what specifically did those teachers do? Finally, ask students to describe the responsibilities of a caring class in the context of COVID-19. Creating a Caring Class Constitution sets public health and academic expectations in a collaborative way, strives to meet the needs of the community as students see themselves in relation, and gives students responsibility for learning and caring for each other alongside the instructor. For instance, rather than an instructor immediately dismissing class if a student does not wear a mask, or the student being shamed by the instructor or peers for not wearing one, a Caring Class Constitution might specify that another student would offer an extra clean mask for their peer to wear. An ethic of care calls us to make decisions by enriching relationships and empathizing rather than dividing.