Lessons in Pedagogy from Teaching Neuroethics in Year One of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Crises offer opportunities to examine core principles and values around which institutions are organized. Here, we explore what the COVID-19 pandemic has meant for teaching and learning of neuroethics, and for general pedagogical practice.

One year ago, we shared insights on teaching neuroethics amidst the pandemic and associated crises [1]. Millions of people worldwide have now died as a result of SARS-CoV2-related illness [2], and untold numbers may suffer from lingering illness (long COVID). Public health experts warned that marginalized populations were bearing the brunt of the pandemic; these warnings are unhappily confirmed in uneven rates of illness and death on a global scale and within wealthy, highly stratified nations like the US.

In the midst of an ongoing public health crisis and reactionary pushback to social justice efforts, institutions and educators may struggle to act responsibly.

In 2020, the US saw protest movements in response to extreme inequality and ongoing racist violence, yet 2021 began with a white supremacist attack on the US capitol and continued with attacks on critical race theory.

First, while the virtual classroom was not always ideal, it presented key learning opportunities. Most importantly, this modality allowed accessibility for disabled students that is rare within higher education. Next, we were able to invite guest lecturers remotely, opening the classroom to a wider range of expert voices.

Students expressed general appreciation of ethical analysis, as it helped them to understand current crises. Finally, this year cemented key justice considerations within pedagogical practice, including universal accessibility as a cornerstone of disability rights and a need for intersectional analysis [5] in neuroethics. Teaching during this year highlighted the importance of grace and compassion within a liberatory educational framework, where sharing of power allows students and teachers to reason together about pressing moral problems.
