

# THE CHALLENGES OF STARTING A NEW JOB IN A PANDEMIC

**Tina Brown**

Kanda University of International Studies

## INTRODUCTION

My contract at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) started on April 1st, 2020. I am not only new to the school, but also new to teaching in higher education and, like most of my colleagues, new to online teaching. I have kept a journal about the experience since April 7, 2020. Drawing on those journal entries, I will reflect on my outlook before classes started, the physical and emotional challenges I faced, and how I changed over the semester.

## THE BEFORE TIMES

Reading through my journals from the first 3 weeks of April it is apparent that I was excited about starting my new job. In early April I wrote "I would like to have a solid plan for the entire semester for all of my classes before we actually begin classes" (April 10, 2020). I laughed out loud when I read this recently. The hubris astounds me, but it does illustrate the point that I was excited and eager to start working.

As the days went on, it became apparent that I would not have a solid plan for all classes. I began to feel stressed just a few days before classes started, which was on April 27, 2020. On this day I wrote "I feel a lot of pressure and responsibility...That is exactly what I wanted, a job with more responsibility. But I also wasn't counting on it being in the midst of a pandemic without the support of physically nearby coworkers". I was beginning to recognize the limitations of online work, such as being unable to casually ask questions to coworkers in the hallway and having no idea what other teachers were doing.

## PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

I expected to have some fatigue caused by online teaching, but nothing could have prepared me for such intense physical problems. One of the reasons I pursued a career in teaching is because I didn't want to be at a desk all day. It is natural to move around the classroom when teaching, but the COVID-19 pandemic has changed that.

According to my journal, I first experienced physical problems directly related to work starting on May 25, 2020 - four weeks into the online semester. I typically use my partner's computer which is on a raised platform on a desk. It was very convenient for online classes, but I began to realize it was causing me problems. On May 28, 2020 I wrote "particularly on Tuesday [May 26], I noticed that every time I used that computer my neck would hurt and I would start to feel

dizzy. By my afternoon meeting I could barely look up". Despite efforts to add extra movement to my daily routine, it wasn't enough to keep me healthy. I needed a new plan.

I started by using my laptop more, so my head pointed down instead of up. This alleviated some pain, but ultimately just allowed one part of me to start feeling better while another part hurt. In addition, I avoided voluntary meetings and interactions. I finally solved my problem by adapting my office area to accommodate my laptop as a standing desk. It turns out a little bit of standing is just what I needed. I immediately noticed a difference. At the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> week of the semester, I used it for 1 hour of conversation with students for the first time. I wrote "I used the standing desk setup for conversation, and it was really nice. It felt a little more natural to be standing and talking. Plus, I had a lot of freedom to move around, so I wasn't stiff afterwards" (June 19, 2020).

I now use my standing desk for at least 2 hours each day. My physical condition has improved and standing while talking feels much more natural to me. This may not be an option for everyone, but the space the laptop stand occupies is minimal and the results have been incredible. Of all of the challenges I faced, this one had the simplest solution.

## **EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES**

I faced several emotional challenges in my first term at KUIS. Shortly before classes started I began to feel overwhelmed. The way I would normally deal with this is by talking with veterans and getting some tips. However, being new and working online made this more difficult.

One way I dealt with this was by working longer hours than I normally would. I believe strongly in a healthy work-life balance, but a global pandemic can skew that balance. I can't say this was healthy, and I do not endorse this solution, but this is what I did.

A healthier way I dealt with feeling overwhelmed was by collaborating with a coworker. Having someone as a go-to person for questions, even though she was also new, was extremely helpful. In addition, it is sometimes challenging to meet a lot of new people all at once. By focusing on forming one solid relationship with a coworker, I was able to lower my anxiety level.

A final way I dealt with feeling overwhelmed with work was by consulting with former coworkers about pedagogical issues. Having someone to talk to about a random article I read, or a complicated grammar point, was helpful. I even convinced one of my former coworkers to attend an online conference with me so I could talk to someone about it. As I reread my journal and thought about this, I realized that maintaining old bonds is important to me. I am cautious when making new friends which causes me to depend heavily on preexisting relationships. I see this as a testament to the strength of my past friendships and professional relationships.

After weeks of feeling overwhelmed, my workload suddenly dropped off. This presented a new challenge, which was feeling unmotivated. On June 23, 2020 - 8 weeks into the online term - I

proposed three reasons for my sudden low motivation. I identified the fact that I had become less busy, that I had overworked the previous day, and that the rainy season had come.

My motivation, which I tracked on a scale from 1 to 5, took a sudden dip near the end of June. This coincides with when I finally finished planning and creating materials for the term. I felt like I had been sprinting to the end of a race and I'd finally made it, but I was still gasping for air. I needed a moment to recover. After about a week of motivation levels around 1 and 2, I suddenly jumped up to a 4. The event that caused this was a brief campus visit.

On June 29, 2020 my apartment building was under construction, so I asked permission to go to work. I had never seen my office, so I was nervous and excited. The next day I recounted my visit writing, "I've been enjoying working from home, but it's exciting to think about the idea of maybe getting to work at work. I've never had such a nice, big work environment before". Part of the draw of my new job was definitely the improved physical work environment. Working from home has its perks, but I would love to be able to use my own office someday soon. The visit to campus was perhaps the best way to reinvigorate me and get me excited about work again.

## **HOW I CHANGED**

Looking back on my journal it is obvious that I had some very utopian ideas of what life would be like at my new job. As time went on, I formed some more realistic expectations. My daily goals became more specific, such as work on this paper for 1 hour, grade all of the essays for that class, and so on. In the second half of the semester I began to voluntarily attend meetings or other kinds of sessions to work on my professional growth. I also learned about what I need to be successful in a remote working environment. It turns out I need to be even more physically active than I thought. I also need the support of at least a few old and new friends. And when I lose motivation, sometimes I just need to remind myself of why I wanted to be where I am and give myself something to look forward to.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have reflected on my outlook before classes started, the physical and emotional challenges I faced, and how I changed in my first semester at KUIS. Keeping a journal was a wonderful way to contemplate my personal growth. I have learned a lot about myself from this experience and I am now better equipped to handle whatever the second semester has to throw at me.