STRATEGIC EMPATHY IN VIRTUAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTION: A CONTEMPLATIVE ESSAY ABOUT TEACHER-STUDENT RAPPORT DURING TIMES OF CRISIS

James Cartee, The University of Tennessee-Knoxville

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the issue and perception that instructors treat online college students differently than traditional in-person students regarding grades, late assignments, or general well-being. Without tangibly interacting with a physical presence through virtual formats, some faculty members lack the ability and know-how to practice empathy effectively in times of crisis. A review of the current literature explores this crucial topic and provides valuable insights on empathy by defining the term and demonstrating how practitioners can successfully show empathy in today's online learning environment. In hopes of helping current practitioners in higher education, the text then presents tips and advice from personal narratives on how to implement the strategy of active empathy positively and proactively in the online classroom. The text ends with a storytelling approach where empathy was necessary to achieve professional outcomes. The paper stresses the presence of empathy and compassion through intentional engagement with college students in all major times of crisis, including but not limited to the present COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: empathy, instructional communication, virtual delivery, online college learning, learning management systems, higher education distance learning, compassion, caring presence, empathy in teaching

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

This morning, when I first started working on this reflective essay, one of my online university students emailed the following excuse for late work they had not submitted: "Earlier this week my laptop was the victim in a cereal milk accident and did not make it through." Apparently, the student's cell phone had also been disconnected. Now, in circumstances that could easily elicit a mean joke or negative response from me, I, as the instructor, replied with a sensitive and kind message that we would work things out and I thanked her for letting me know. Immediately, the student realized there were no repercussions for the incident on their grades or the opinions held by me as the instructor. One might define this student as an at-risk online learning adult, where harsh criticism has a huge potential to crush a student's hopes and dreams to graduate and eventually have a better life with an attained degree. The current world pandemic, generally known as COVID-19, has made many lives even more complicated with implications that no one could have predicted. Some individuals might react harshly with an insult or sarcastic comment to this situation. I think anyone who was ever a university student has experienced that one insensitive professor, whether learning online or in person on a college campus. There lies the central

issue of this essay: If the response from an online instructor is neither empathetic nor compassionate when life happens, but rather cynical and caustic, perhaps even demeaning a student in the process, then that student will struggle even more to find the resilient to persevere and succeed. I have experienced a lack of empathy from professors myself, and of course, I have heard multiple students inform me of situations where other instructors demonstrated a lack of empathy, especially in times of need.

In my higher education teaching career, I have taught undergraduate courses through online platforms for over 11 years now. In addition to the current conditions with COVID-19 in the world and specifically in the United States, I have experienced multiple incidents of crisis, including but certainly not limited to natural disasters, severe illnesses, mental health concerns, and even signs of domestic violence. At the height of the pandemic, unexpected conflict with close family members, internet connectivity issues, lack of comprehensive feedback on assignments, the inability to focus because of cabin fever, and lack of personal self-motivation encompassed just a few of the many challenging adjustments virtual college students and instructors faced among multiple complicating factors (Ellis, 2020). Without the advantage of talking to students in person where nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, can be considered, measuring a person's needs in times of crisis becomes even more problematic as does gauging the severity. If a crisis arises, some professors take students at their word while others seek evidence of a major life-changing event to excuse schoolwork, such as a hurricane, testing positive for COVID-19, or the death of a loved one. A student with these struggles must reach out to an online instructor to seek assistance or receive accommodations, and more than likely they will reveal personal information that could influence any response from the instructor positively or negatively. Fear of a negative reaction may result in them not asking for help. Rather than practicing empathy as the norm, some professors may demonstrate that they are not concerned with these students' pleas or the present crisis, especially if the professor is not experiencing the crisis firsthand in their own hometown.

After risking the chance of being embarrassed, a student might experience discouragement when given a negative backlash and quit college, never to return or graduate. When this tragedy occurs, and it does happen, the possibility for a better life for them becomes more difficult to achieve. The dream is then crushed for the individual, and society misses out on a chance to have an educated participant who could have given back to the community through productive employment or even philanthropic endeavors.

Multiple definitions and explanations of what empathy comprises exist in academic scholarly research. In one instance, Bradley et al. (2019) described empathy with the following: "Empathy is a cognitive skill that includes the ability to understand a person's experience and communicate in a manner that conveys a recognition of individual concerns and perspectives" (p. 252). The tendency to do good by serving another person characterizes empathy in a pedagogical approach to both student and instructor. In other words, when a situation necessitates professional intervention, an individual should give another individual the benefit of the doubt before affirming judgmental assumptions about their circumstances. Learning to understand and implement an empathetic attitude as a college instructor will potentially change the outcome of another person's life beyond the virtual walls of an online classroom. Therefore, empathy is a valuable skill worth considering, and in this paper I provide observations through my current research, my own life experiences, and my current career path.

RELEVANT RESEARCH ON EXPRESSED EMPATHY IN A COLLEGE SETTING

Research on caring for students through acts of empathy and compassion, especially with online learning, could add value to the knowledge base that exists today. In a hybrid course (a class that integrates both virtual and in-person activities), Thomas and Sedell (2018) learned that the practice of empathy utilized by instructors provided sincere attention to the needs of students in the described academic programs. The instructors in this study assisted in achieving learning outcomes and explored the best strategies involving technology to build rapport and community among peers. This approach prevented students from feeling distanced from their professors, a common downfall of

online learning. Meyer (2013) further described this process with the following statement:

> *Empathizing consists of understanding a student's circumstances based on the general consideration of one's own experiences and communicating that understanding to encourage the student. Empathy can include freely admitting that you as a faculty member are also involved in lifelong learning (p. 45).*

Being able to practice active empathy involves remembering what it was like to be a student. The habit of imagining what it is like to be in another person's shoes becomes one of the best ways to engage in empathy with another person. Concerning the overall health and well-being of students in an online classroom environment, Bigman and Mitchell (2020) stressed that sincere instructor attitudes of compassion and authenticity were appreciated by students in computer science classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several unique accommodations on a case-by-case basis were made for students amid life tragedies where self-care became a consistent theme in these courses and was sometimes even integrated as part of strategic assignments, making sure students were, in fact, taking care of themselves on a personal level.

Regarding a caring presence in a college classroom at several universities during the COVID-19 pandemic, both faculty members and students felt relationally distanced from one another in the sudden shift from face-to-face to remote learning. However, an empathetic instructor presence does not necessarily mean an individual must be physically near a person to experience this caring presence firsthand (Christopher et al., 2020). The online presence of compassion becomes prevalent when an instructor posts an individualized response on a student's discussion board post or when addressing a student by name in an email specifically written to them, perhaps even just checking in to see how things are going. For instance, in the introduction discussion board of one course, when a professor posted a real photo of themselves and asked students to do the same, the practice created a personal touch at the start of the semester and established credibility as an individual who cares (Fuller, 2012).

Building credibility at the beginning of an academic term remains paramount to start the class off on a strong note when building community among students and instructors alike. According to a study conducted by Teven and Gorham (1998), students indicated that a genuine concern for their grades and performance in a class exhibited a sincere caring presence in the classroom. Positivity through responses and feedback to student questions and remarks also indicated the empathetic nature of an involved instructor. Initiating one-on-one conversations and addressing individuals by their first names in these interactions was also well received by students in the personal attention provided. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals who were traditionally in-person, on-campus college students transitioned to online learning without being given a choice to do otherwise. If a student desired to make progress towards a degree, then virtual platforms were the only options available to them. Such instances, White and Ruth-Sahd (2020) claimed, "increased stress levels and shorter attention spans impacted the ability to concentrate and retain information, making quality communication along with flexibility elemental for success" (p. 295). Some students quickly adapted to the new technology and sometimes did so without the ability to leave the house to vent or decompress from these stressful changes. Many students cognitively struggled to continue their education after the transition that involved these unexpected developments because they were isolated and cut off from a real-world university campus community.

When a faculty member realizes their influence on a student's well-being as a person, they will then begin to understand the true nature of empathy. For a caring response to have a long-lasting impact or change a life, a student must be convinced that a professor was deeply touched by the situation surrounding the need for practiced empathy. Compassion cannot be just a vague feeling or a nice, well-said statement (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). It must be heartfelt in the conversations surrounding the current circumstances, especially when a crisis arises, including the loss of a loved one. These dramatic occurrences cannot simply be turned away as another routine day but rather must be treated as the life-altering events that they are.

Virtual learning has become commonplace through the COVID-19 pandemic with some universities going completely online and abandoning any student presence in person on campus. The threat of feeling distant and isolated becomes a real challenge for both faculty and students. Empathy then becomes paramount to assist individuals in the struggle to persevere through adverse times.

Some students possess a fear of failure or think that success with academic achievements develops and grows into a sense of belonging in the classroom setting, especially in a measure of popularity among peers and in instructor approval. Therefore, teacher empathy can respond to these individualistic tendencies by creating a warm classroom environment by affirming the different successes of all students and making time to know each student on an individual level (Meyers et al., 2019). Practicing true empathy in these prescribed conditions can be extremely time consuming for faculty who already have many responsibilities with both service and research commitments to fulfill. Professors need to dedicate the necessary resources and time to learn empathy for effective learning outcomes with their students. Getting to know each student on an individual basis will be rewarding for the welfare and future of those students being served by the generosity of instructors in university courses. Of course, getting to know students on a personal, intimate level in a fast-paced online course of 6 weeks or less becomes extremely difficult. Typically in a virtual environment, especially in a traditional three-semester academic calendar (fall, spring, and summer) where each term lasts approximately four months and entails longer class durations, then the instructor truly gets the opportunity to know their student constituents on a deeper level.

When many in-person classes transitioned into virtual formats during the spring semester of 2020, many students who were typically quiet during face-to-face sessions were more willing to respond and participate in synchronous learning environments with their cameras turned off on programs like Zoom (Othman, 2020). In times of crisis, like COVID-19, the instructor in some sense becomes both a teacher and a learner as adaptations are quickly made in terms of arranging accommodations and technology requirements,

especially with synchronous class participation. Constant changes in university strategic planning bring forth the necessity to become genuinely flexible and inclusive to the needs of the concerned student populations.

In addition to the previously mentioned studies, Hawk and Lyons (2008) conducted a multilevel questionnaire with many Master of Business Administration (MBA) students who expressed a hope that faculty would not give up on them. These scholars went on to add that "it is important for faculty to care about the learning of their students and respect them" (p. 317). Additionally, as an observation "the instructor has the opportunity to model and exemplify caring behavior" (p. 322). The students in the study presented ways that professors could show they did not give up on them as successful practitioners all the way up to graduation. Being prepared for class, being available to speak with students outside of class, providing positive feedback, and building a safe environment of encouragement were among the practices that professors could implement to show they really cared. In other words, by performing these basic acts of acknowledgment, these instructors demonstrated service, empathy, and compassion and were recognized for doing so. Most importantly, it mattered to the graduate students that these professors cared about their education and their welfare as individuals outside of class as well.

On the flip side of this topic, from the instructor's perspective, keep in mind that it is just as possible that a student might complain to a department chair, dean, or even university president about a professor, despite one's best efforts to help a person. Naturally, a student might also give an instructor a bad teaching evaluation. Perhaps empathy goes both ways in an instructor-student relationship, but not necessarily for students and their struggles. Faculty and university administration are, after all, people who feel affirmed by acts and words of encouragement when tragedy strikes in life. Even with the best outreach attempts for struggling college students, sometimes the only response that remains is silence. In that particular instance, even with the most empathetic of professors, there comes a time when the only person that can help themselves is the student who desires to learn

and therefore responds to the outreach process. In this case, the instructor can only initiate a caring message to check in with the student who is potentially in distress, challenged by class, or has other mitigating factors and offer assistance.

GUIDANCE AND TIPS TO PRACTICING EMPATHY AND COMPASSION IN ONLINE EDUCATION

How different people practice empathy toward others might vary greatly in approach and effectiveness, depending on their background, experience, and circumstances. However, the practice of showing empathy in virtual learning systems during times of crises looks essentially the same across an array of diverse disciplines. First and foremost, as the old saying goes, one must place themselves in the shoes of another person to understand what the other individual might be experiencing beyond the online classroom. With a more comprehensive approach, Jones et al. (2018) eloquently described empathy from this perspective, filling the shoes of another, with the following text:

> Empathy is a concerned response to another person's feelings. It involves thinking, feeling, and even a physical reaction that our bodies have to other people when we relate to how they feel. To have empathy, we have to notice and understand others' feelings, but that isn't enough. We also need to care about and value them (para. 6).

If a person tries to remember the past, most practitioners in higher education can recollect what it was like to be a student in a university environment. It was not that long ago when I enrolled in my undergraduate education where I admired and sometimes even sought the approval of professors I respected. I experienced the encouragement of affirmation and even the discouragement of abusive criticism by these potential mentors. Empathy, as an active discipline, comes alive when you try to place yourself in the actual position of an undergraduate student. This act might require some imagination if one is not able to physically see the face of a student through Zoom, Adobe Connect, online lectures, or other technological means.

Second, actively listen to concerns and questions before quickly responding in a conversation or writing an electronic message possibly through email, chat, or discussion boards. Once an instructor hits the send button on any technological program, the words are often recorded and cannot be retrieved if the text could potentially be interpreted differently than originally intended. After listening, think carefully about how to respond and what to say so the desired meaning and context are apparent to the student involved.

Third, never react to a sensitive situation when experiencing a high level of personal emotions for any reason. When situations in an online learning community necessitate a delicate touch, a person experiencing frustration from a traffic jam earlier in the day may come across as aggressive and directed that at the person they are communicated with, which could be a university administrator, faculty member, or student. When writing about a serious matter that could come across as emotionally intense, I rarely send that text immediately, and I will often go through several drafts, perhaps even asking someone else to read and edit the message with an offered opinion on its meaning. Consider pausing before sending the message to give yourself a chance to reread and revise. Written words matter, and an online educator must maintain their composure in a manner befitting the profession, especially in the discipline of teaching Communication courses. I sometimes will even request that a student call my Google Voice number to address serious situations, like a student being very upset over a bad grade on an important assignment on which they had worked several hours. Sometimes voice-to-voice communication is the best medium for managing delicate situations with sensitive student personalities. This method of communication has been especially helpful during the current COVID-19 pandemic when some students and their loved ones are dealing with sickness and loss resulting from the virus.

On a fourth note, realize that every student is different. Every student learns in a different capacity, and unless a student reveals information about their personal life, you might never know what a person is truly going through. Sometimes there are no tangible in-person observations to be made. The only context one can judge from is by drawing observations from the created text messages being sent between the instructor and student. I make it

a point to save all my communication texts with every student in case that information needs to be reviewed for any future reason. What works for one student may not work for another. As teachers, we must deliver information in a way that a student best learns, which can sometimes be difficult to measure in a virtual classroom. With this realization, it becomes vital to establish a rapport with students early in the course to let them know you are present and available if a student needs to reach out.

With the fifth tip in mind, validate and affirm the student's feelings in the situation at hand, including COVID-19, no matter how you feel about the pandemic. If a student is blatantly upset over the circumstances being addressed, then listen before you speak. Acknowledge the person's feelings to validate their presence in the moment. Perhaps even let the student calm down on their end before resolving whatever might be bothering the student. Sometimes we, as humans, just want somebody to listen, even if no resolution presents itself. The reply, "I understand where you are coming from," can go a long way when trying to encourage a student, no matter what the other person's background is in any stage of life. We all need moments of affirmation in life, and online professors have hundreds of opportunities to offer strategic words that validate another person.

Regarding a sixth and final tip, know when to draw the line. Each professor typically knows when to practice empathy and when to be stern in direct response to a request, depending on the situation and the student. Instructors instinctively know when a student is trying to take advantage of them or a specific situation, and I have heard every excuse one could truly imagine. Even though I respect transparent honesty, I have had a few students email me that they "forgot" about the assignment deadline. In a serious graduate school program, that excuse is not going to fly.

While this reflective essay has primarily discussed the idea of providing students with an empathetic experience during challenging times, there comes a moment when one must enforce deadlines or teach a student a hard lesson about the real world by giving the individual a zero on an assignment. A second chance is reasonable in many cases, but if a student cannot make a second negotiated deadline for a major assignment, the inevitable consequences may need to be enforced with a reasonable explanation. In these described cases, sometimes consequences are necessary even while maintaining a level of empathy for the student in question. Of course, all circumstances necessitate their evaluation of what to do in a timely, professional fashion with a sensitive tone. COVID-19 has impacted educational institutions in unprecedented ways, and reactions with expressed compassion might be extended beyond what usually is the norm. There is nothing normal about our societal status in these interesting times where health and safety need to be the primary concerns of leaders who serve in administrative and faculty management positions.

FURTHER FINAL THOUGHTS AND PERSONAL SITUATIONS

For a student to be resilient and succeed, empathy is the best practice and approach to take to inspire the individual seeking assistance from an instructor. In times of crisis, this perspective of practicing a live presence in an online classroom becomes even more important as lives are destroyed outside of the classroom. For example, as an online academic coach for a university on the Gulf of Mexico coastline of Texas, I knew many students and even faculty who lost their homes to hurricanes, often having to evacuate to avoid the damage caused by the storms. Therefore, both academic coaches and professors touched lives based on the response given to students experiencing crisis and tragedy by extending deadlines, having open office hours on Zoom, and occasionally granting an incomplete for a class. After some students experienced the devastation of losing everything, practiced empathy kept students involved where many excelled in their coursework with acts of grace extended to them through compassion.

While teaching online for a traditional university, first a brick-and-mortar before becoming a combined click-and-mortar institution, I encountered a student who had cancer, and from our conversations over the phone, I sensed she might have had a terminal diagnosis. While I did not often say much over the phone, because I could not imagine what it was like to be in her position, I listened. College seemed to be an outlet for this individual, and when loved ones seemed

few and far between, I was there to comfort the student as best I could. While I tried to direct our conversations towards the class, I know I assisted this student in a turbulent time simply by being there with online office hours. She asked intelligent questions and genuinely seemed interested in learning about Intercultural Communication. By learning and actively practicing the skill of empathy and compassion, I was able to change several lives amid hurricanes, cancer diagnoses, and other times of crisis. You might be surprised how often these relevant events come up in the lives of the online adult learner. I have grown to expect the unexpected when working in these environments, and hopefully, I will serve in a kind capacity when circumstances necessitate that sort of response. This concern with online learning warrants more reflection, analysis, expert advice, and further research studies to understand how university professors can best assist their students in adverse times. For now, the active practice of empathy becomes an excellent starting point for college faculty and staff to learn and emulate to make the learning experience for students the absolute best it can be.

REFERENCES

Bigman, M., & Mitchell, J. C. (2020). Teaching online in 2020: Experiments, empathy, discovery. In 2020 IEEE Learning with MOOCS (LWMOOCS)(pp. 156–161). https://doi.org/10.1109/LWMOOCS50143.2020.9234318

Bradley, H. B., Cook, L. L., Morrow, L., Leasca, J. B., & Lampley, T. (2019). Refocusing the lens: Caring and compassion in an online nursing environment. Nursing Education Perspectives, 40(4), 252–253. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.NEP.0000000000000399

Christopher, R., de Tantillo, L., & Watson, J. (2020). Academic caring pedagogy, presence, and Communitas in nursing education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nursing Outlook, 68(6), 822–829. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2020.08.006

Ellis, W. (2020, August 19). It's compassion, not capitulation, to ask less of students amid disruption. Inside Higher Ed. https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/08/19/it%E2%80%99s-compassion-not-capitulation-ask-less-students-amid-disruption-opinion

Fuller, R. G. (2012). Building empathy in online courses: Effective practical approaches. International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education, 8(4), 38–49. https://doi.org/10.4018/jicte.2012100104

Hawk, T. F., & Lyons, P. R. (2008). Please don't give up on me: When faculty fail to care. Journal of Management Education, 32(3), 316–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562908314194

Jones, S., Weissbourd, R., Bouffard, S., Kahn, J., & Anderson, T. R. (2018, October). How to build empathy and strengthen your school community. Making Caring Common Project. Harvard Graduate School of Education. https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/how-build-empathy-strengthen-school-community

Jordan, J. V., & Schwartz, H. L. (2018). Radical empathy in teaching. New Directions for Teaching & Learning, 2018(153), 25–35. https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20278

Meyer, P. (2013). Crafting an approach to online teaching. Journal of Instructional Research, 2, 43–47. https://doi.org/10.9743/JIR.2013.2.15

Meyers, S., Rowell, K., Wells, M., & Smith, B. C. (2019). Teacher empathy: A model of empathy for teaching for student success. College Teaching, 67(3), 160–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2019.1579699

Othman, R. (2020). Managing student and faculty expectations and the unexpected during the COVID-19 lockdown: Role transformation. Accounting Research Journal, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print). https://doi.org/10.1108/ARJ-09-2020-0283

Teven, J. J., & Gorham, J. (1998). A qualitative analysis of low‑inference student perceptions of teacher caring and non‑caring behaviors within the college classroom. Communication Research Reports, 15(3), 288–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824099809362125

Thomas, C., & Sedell, J. (2018). Improving student learning through faculty empathy in a hybrid course community. Liberal Education, 104(3), 48–55. https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2018/summer/thomas_sedell

White, K. A., & Ruth-Sahd, L. A. (2020). Compassionate teaching strategies amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Nurse Educator, 45(6), 294–295. https://doi.org/10.1097/NNE.0000000000000901