

HERE TO HELP: HOW PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY MADE FOR FACE-TO-FACE CHANGE

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To bridge the gap between the learning goals of the classroom and the overtaxed, returning-from-the-pandemic learner, adapting teaching practices to respond to present-day experiences became a way to facilitate success. Weaving anecdotal experiences with pedagogical scholarship, this discussion explores the impact of practices that approach the learning experience with grace (Su, 2021) and care (Mehrotra, 2021). These practices include the value of putting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs before Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning (Mutch & Peung, 2021), and adopting a trauma-informed approach to create opportunity for all students' success. This includes: Incorporating opportunities for students to make decisions and exercise choice over aspects of their assignments and facilitating a sense of ownership over their learning (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018), incorporating structured engagement among peers to create a supportive learning community (Lang, 2020), and incorporating practices of instructional care and holistic recognition to build trusting relationships.

In March of 2020, students and instructors began to navigate the pivot from face-to-face delivery and collective classrooms to the unexpected experiences of technology mediated education in the largely isolated and self-motivated COVID-19 pandemic environment. The near daily changes during this time created an uncertain atmosphere for students who could no longer know what to expect. Students began to express feelings of stress and anxiety at levels that were interfering with their ability to complete assignments and readings (Mehrotra, 2021, p. 540). Blaskovits et al. (2023) states “postsecondary institutions were finding ways to limit disruptions to learning and individuals’ degrees as much as possible by switching formats, but the impact on the students...was substantial” (p. 4). During this period in my teaching career pandemic pedagogical themes began to develop, many that have now been incorporated into my present-day teaching. Themes of class community, communication, targeted workloads and content, and personal application of course work began to emerge immediately. As it became clear that

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pandemic teaching was not the short-term affair originally proposed, I developed and deepened pedagogical methods that centered student self-determination, trauma-informed approaches, a pedagogy of grace and compassion, and a deeper dedication to Universal Design for Learning (UDL); many of these changes have proven to be effective in the face-to-face classroom as well.

Impacts of Stress and Trauma on Learning

This paper focuses solely on the impacts of the stressors during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic but this narrow focus is not meant to undermine that before the pandemic 70% of students had traumatic events occur in their lives before attending post-secondary and 34% of them likely met the threshold for post-traumatic stress disorder (Cusack et al., 2019). Because the toll of the early stages of the pandemic on students was profound and rates of grief, worry, anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms rose substantially, this paper focuses on responding to students in the post-2020 academic world (Sillcox, 2022, pp. 3-4).

Jill Levenson (2017) defines trauma as: “an exposure to an extraordinary experience that presents a physical or psychological threat to oneself or others and generates a reaction of helplessness and fear” (as cited by Jones, 2023, p. 3). The impact of trauma and (dis)stress on learning can be devastating as trauma symptoms can include difficulty concentrating, disengagement, intrusive thoughts, sleep disruption, distractions, and hypervigilance (Jones, 2023, p. 10). Students with anxiety and depression symptoms – a reaction, in some cases, to prolonged stress – also report concentration difficulties and trouble with completing school tasks as well as poorer social relationships, reduced self-learning capabilities, and inferior academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2020, p. 104). With the knowledge that trauma and sustained stress has a negative impact on mental health and learning, and understanding that the pandemic was a major stressor event for learners, pedagogical changes were necessary in both the immediate and long-term for my teaching practice.

Immediate Pandemic Pedagogical Shifts

Converting Cognitive Domain Outcomes to Affective Domain Outcomes

One of the first shifts I experienced was adopting a “Maslow before Bloom” perspective: “Maslow before Bloom” is the belief that educators need to center students’ basic needs (Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs) before they expect students to be able to meet learning outcomes (Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning) (Mutch & Peung, 2021, p. 83). For example, one of the layers of Maslow’s pyramid of basic needs is the need for safety and security - a student who is not safe and feels defenseless will have great difficulty mastering even the more basic elements of the taxonomy of learning such as memorization and understanding new information. One of the first ways Maslow before Bloom became apparent was with my approach to assessments. Cognitive abilities decline in the face of intense or prolonged stress as Martinez-Gattel & Smalley (2019) state, “working memory, attention, response inhibition and cognitive flexibility have all been

found to be impaired by stress” (2019, para 6). Despite the increased stress-load students still had things they had learned and could share, but they needed to be allowed to frame it in a different way. I moved away from Cognitive Domain assessments to Affective Domain assessments. In most cases, a question that simply asked students to demonstrate and describe with facts and data (the Understanding and Applying levels of the Cognitive Domain) was adapted to one that probed into demonstrating and describing (the Receiving and Valuing levels of the Affective Domain) how the student felt about or responded to the information. Adjusting assessments to measure more Affective Domain outcomes allowed me to retain the assessments while not increasing pressure on the student.

Pedagogy of Care and the Battle Against Burnout

Adopting a Maslow before Bloom perspective allowed me to respect my students as holistic learners. They are whole human-beings with lives and needs beyond the coursework and they deserve my respect and care. Their feelings about the situation in general, and our class specifically, were valid and warranted my encouragement to express themselves (Green, 2022). Class discussions would often start with a class-wide check-in and our virtual classroom became a place to share, gain support, and be validated. Student mental health was also closely considered; a person who is of ill health – mentally, physically, or emotionally – is not in the best shape to learn (Sillcox, 2022). Discussion on where to find help and resources, and class time devoted to ‘quick tips’ to encourage support seeking behaviours or encourage healthy coping were built into each week’s online sessions.

Unexpectedly, these efforts served as not just a way to create community and support the whole student, but also to help combat student burnout. According to Merhi et al. (2018), “academic burnout is defined as a persistent negative mental state regarding studies, mainly characterized by emotional exhaustion accompanied by discomfort, cynicism or detachment from studies and lack of academic self-efficacy in students” (p. 53). Instances of student academic burnout are almost always linked to the perception of heavy academic demands placed on a student who feels (or is) under-supported or not provided the necessary resources or strategies for success (Merhi et al, 2018, p. 54). The academic situation during the pandemic created more demands on students and amplified resource constraints – an environment ripe for student burnout. However, efforts to prioritize basic needs, validate feelings, and invest in mental health strategies are powerful tools to help negate student burnout according to Green (2022). The reciprocity built into this type of engagement firmly roots it in a pedagogy of care paradigm. A pedagogy of care is a facet of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) – an approach to teaching and learning that creates an environment conducive for success for all learners (King-Sears et al, 2023).

The Importance of Communication

Lilian Holms (2023) relates that the opposite of traumatic stress and the accompanying feeling of being unsafe is knowledge of safety, support, information, and control. The shifts of the early days of the pandemic proved that what may have been acceptable during the stable day-to-day was immediately ineffective in the dizzying present. Students asked for clear communications that outlined expectations on assignments, upcoming deadlines, and other pertinent information (such as information regarding institutional-level pandemic response changes that would impact them). They explained that the online environment and the subsequent isolation made deadlines and assignment expectations seem nebulous and intangible. Responding to these needs I sent out weekly class newsletters that informed students of what was upcoming and any other information that they needed to know for the week. These weekly missives allowed students to feel rooted, supported, and informed.

Remind (a free messaging app for educators to use with students) SMS messages became much more prevalent. The Remind app became a way for students to keep in contact with me now that we could no longer meet face-to-face. Students regularly texted me with questions or concerns as they worked on their assignments, and it became clear that this form of communication was an important and high-quality tool for student learning. For example, students who frequently checked-in about assignments and class content often handed in better quality work as they had taken more opportunity to clarify as they worked through things. I found that students were using the app more frequently than they had in the pre-pandemic classroom to ask questions about assignments and they were using it in ways that replaced face-to-face communication that would have occurred before/during/after classes.

Longer-Term Strategies

Entering the 2020-2021 academic year I believed that students would be starting their first fully online pandemic term carrying stress. Many would potentially have experienced personal, family, or community traumas after the first summer of the pandemic and in the wake of the wide-spread protests that occurred in response to the death of George Floyd. I began centering trauma-informed approaches that revolved around the main principles of empowerment, choice, collaboration, safety, and trustworthiness (Jones, 2023, p. 10). Trauma-informed pedagogy is an aspect of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and are “practices that are intended to reduce the potential for harm, and to increase the potential for thriving, among students with trauma” (Jones, 2023, pp. 9-10).¹ I also revisited a core teaching fundamental – grace in teaching (Su, 2013, 2021). Teaching with grace emphasizes that a student’s worth is not based on their performance, they are worthy of being treated with dignity regardless of their achievements, and that a foundation of grace in a classroom will give students the safety they need to fail and try again (Su, 2021).

Self-Determination

To give students choice, I created three different assignment streams, or tracks, in my first-year level Art History survey course. Each schedule resulted with the same amount of work overall, but it was broken down into a choice of workload with light, medium, or heavy assignment grade weights and options between a fast-paced, medium-paced, or slow-paced schedule of due dates. In the first track students had small assignments worth 10% (+/-) that were due each week with no heavy exams but with many peer-to-peer learning opportunities. The second stream presented students with medium weighted assignments that were due twice a month with discussions taking the place of exams and peer review built into the research paper scaffolding. The third and final track was the most self-directed and had a major assignment per month with the least amount of peer-to-peer interaction. Students self-enrolled in an assignment schedule that they felt would fit their learning approach and their schedule the best.

Wolpert-Gawron, in *Why choice matters to student learning* (2018), shares the equation “Choice + Agency = Learning.” While I had wanted to give students a sense of control to help ground them in their course this change ended up achieving far more than I intended. I noticed that students took more ownership of their learning and their progress in the course. SFIs (Student Feedback Instrument – a post-course questionnaire that allows students to give anonymous feedback to the institution regarding their experiences in a class) and informal feedback showed the value students placed on having the choice to pick an assignment schedule and structure that suited their needs. If they missed their self-determined learning goals (established at the beginning of the term) they exhibited a sense of responsibility because they had chosen their path. This is a natural consequence of student choice (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018); it is human nature to be more determined to execute a solution when it is our own idea (Voss, 2016, p. 169). A meta-analysis by Patall et al., (n.d.; as cited by Wolpert-Gawron, 2018) showed that allowing students choice “enhanced intrinsic motivation, effort, task performance, and perceived competence, among other outcomes;” I found these things to be true.

In my second-year level Art History course I incorporated renewable assignments that emphasized real-world impact. Students followed a scaffolded schedule for their research papers (drafts, peer-review rounds, instructor feedback, etc.) but students chose the topic and scope of their research and were then encouraged to publish their final papers in the course Open Education Resource (OER) textbook. The OER textbook for the course was designed to incorporate student work and this helped create greater meaning and purpose for their writing assignments by including the peer-reviewed essays for future classmates to read. In our online course this was a successful exercise as most students created excellent research papers and submitted their papers to be published in the textbook. It seemed that the real-world implication helped focus their efforts when, in such a high stress period, writing a research paper about art and artists of the 1800s could have seemed a frivolous task.

Pandemic Pedagogy Approaches in the Present

After teaching online in a perpetual pandemic pedagogical mode for two academic years I returned to the face-to-face classroom and made some permanent changes in my teaching approaches. Gabor Maté in *When the body says no: The cost of hidden stress* (2003) states: “Chronic stress is activation of the stress mechanism over long periods of time when a person is exposed to stressors that cannot be escaped either because [they do] not recognize them or because [they have] no control over them” (p.35) and I suspected that the pandemic, and the various forms of social unrest that unfolded during the height of online learning, were long-term stressors students had no control over. Students were entering post-secondary with long-term stress, and this created a pre-disposition to academic burnout. Having seen success with the online learning changes I implemented, I incorporated similar changes in my face-to-face classrooms to see if they were as successful. I believe, as James Lang suggests in *Distracted: Why students can't focus and what you can do about it* (2020) that a teacher's job isn't just to prepare students for “the future, but for the world in which we are all living now” (p. 7). Since the current state of things is not the same as the pre-pandemic period my instructional approach shouldn't be either.

Go With Grace

During the pandemic I had tried to lead with grace and to always practice compassion with my students. I recognized that in an academic environment where instructors worry about rigor (where rigor means strict rules, harsh assessments, and unyielding attitudes) compassion and grace might seem like weaknesses or unnecessary vulnerabilities. Mehrotra (2021), when implementing a pedagogy of care in her courses shared this fear:

I especially had concerns about students not taking the course seriously, being seen as a push-over, or being perceived as an ineffective instructor. However, students repeatedly indicated that this approach to the course facilitated their learning during a difficult term and helped them feel seen and valued as whole people. (p. 539)

My experiences during the pandemic showed me that when I gave grace and compassion my students flourished, were willing to take risks and make mistakes, and grew as learners. They also gave me grace and compassion in return for when I took risks, made mistakes, and found places I could grow as an instructor. This reciprocity of grace created community. Francis Su in *The Lesson of Grace in Teaching* (2021) summarizes:

Sure, good instructional techniques are necessary for good teaching. But they are not sufficient. They are NOT the foundation. Grace-filled relationships with your students are the foundation for good teaching, because it gives you freedom to explore, freedom to fail. Freedom to let students take control of their own learning, freedom to affirm the struggling student by your own weakness. Grace amplifies the teacher-student relationship to one of greater trust in which a student can thrive.

I made the conscious decision to continue practicing grace and a pedagogy of care. I chose to trust my students and express my trust in them. Our course was meant to work as a community based on mutual respect; a pedagogy of care and leading with grace is a key component of this. In the in-person classroom one facet of grace and care was having due dates but allowing them to be negotiable and never requiring disclosure of private information. If a student needed some grace with a due date, and it was an assignment that allowed for it, then the students knew they would be afforded what they needed without punitive repercussions. The UDL aspect of grace and care meant that all students had access to the same learning opportunities.

Self-Determination and Application

Giving students choice over assignment schedules, research topics, and publication options had gone well in the online environment, but would they work with face-to-face students? In the first-year level survey course the choice of assignment track remained a popular and successful change. Students expressed the same appreciation for the ability to pick what was best for their schedules and their learning preferences. In my second-year level course the self-determination of choosing topics and choosing publication options had different outcomes. The ability to choose their own topic and scope continued to be a success as students explored topics and concepts that interested them. However, fewer students opted to publish their papers in the class textbook once face-to-face instruction resumed. I suspect that this is a sign that the need for real-world application of their work declined as students resumed their lives outside of isolation.

The return to on-campus learning provided a new avenue of student control and choice. I now had the knowledge and opportunity to allow students to attend in-person or online. The campus classrooms had been outfitted with the required technology and I now had the technological experience to be able to offer this.

Conclusion

Teaching through the pandemic and adapting to the unknowns has changed my teaching practice in lasting ways. Spending more time discussing mental health and not seeing it as a ‘waste of content time’ has been helpful in building community and trust in the classroom. I have discovered what Lang expressed in *Distracted* (2020): community must come first, and content will follow (p. 98). No matter what strategies are used in the classroom to foster engagement and learning it will be more successful if a sense of community has been built first (Lang, 2020, p. 98). A community built on respect, grace, and compassion is a place where people can be trusted with witnessing and supporting risks, engaging in repeated attempts to master skills, and where questions, comments, and concerns can be aired.

My return-to-the-classroom did not drop me back into the classrooms I had left in 2020; students, needs, and technology were all different. Accepting these changes has allowed me to trust my students to take control of their own learning in guided ways, to give them options, and has shown that there are always new challenges ahead. Student engagement, globally, has

changed since 2020 (History UK, 2023) and this is a new challenge to tackle. However, with grace, compassion, trauma-informed approaches, more intentional UDL, and focusing on giving students agency and respect, I am confident that even students suffering from academic burn-out on an unimagined scale is something that can be addressed. Equipping students for the current and future world doesn't happen without tackling some unknowns. "It is the person best able to unearth, adapt to, and exploit the unknowns that will come out on top" (Voss, 2016, p. 219); as instructors, with students, we can use the unknown to the advantage of our students if we are willing to face it together because ultimately, we're here to help.

¹The belief held at the core of UDL is that all students benefit from structures that make learning more accessible to all students and this is also the case with trauma-informed and compassionate pedagogies (Jones, 2023, p. 10). A study conducted by King-Sears et al published in 2023 verified that UDL approaches have a positive effect on all learners because it facilitates a flexible and engaging learning environment that responds to learners' needs (p. 12). Even if some students were thriving and unimpacted by current events they would still benefit from this foundation.

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