

Chapter 1

Communicating Compassion in Pedagogy: Lessons From COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented uncertainty and unpleasant feelings among a variety of individuals and populations. Mental health challenges rooted in feelings of social isolation, and for some grief and loss, have sparked dialogue about the importance of communicating compassion during times of crisis. This chapter focuses on instructor-student interactions in the throes of COVID-19 and the critical significance of compassionate pedagogy. While instructors often engage in caring for their students, the authors of this chapter propose that putting forth care and concern or verbalizing empathy or sympathy is drastically different than engaging in compassionate pedagogy. Simply, instructors who show compassion toward their students in times of struggle are actively motivated to alleviate student anxieties or stress through practical accommodation(s). In this chapter, strategies are outlined to give educators the means to implement compassionate pedagogy toward students during and beyond a global crisis.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the January 2020 spring semester very few, if any, faculty members could have conceived of the earth-shattering impact that COVID-19 would have on the world and, subsequently, on higher education. In March 2020 university instructors were required to redesign face-to-face and hybrid classes to be delivered completely online to students in an unprecedented pandemic that brought with it extensive financial hardship, ample uncertainty, and alarming illness. Throughout this tumultuous and

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rapid switch, faculty members and administrators began speaking out about the need for greater compassion in our pedagogy (Head, 2020; Supiano, 2020). It may seem odd that it has taken a pandemic to open the eyes of some to the hardship that many students faced before the term COVID-19 entered the lexicon. The fact is that students at all levels (K-12, undergraduate, graduate) have confronted illness, disability, mental health struggles, food and housing insecurity, and lack of adequate access to technology, among many other challenges, prior to a pandemic. However, what has clearly changed during a pandemic is a clear call for greater compassion in our teaching in times of crisis.

Over the course of the COVID-19 global crisis higher education has experienced seismic shifts. Enrollment declines, layoffs and furloughs of faculty and staff, and near constant reevaluation of course delivery are just some of the institutional difficulties that faculty and students have experienced as a result of the pandemic (Carlson & Gardner, 2020). In addition to the institutional challenges, students struggling with mental health issues, and the constant uncertainty of the pandemic has left faculty on the frontlines of supporting students in ways that may feel very foreign (Brown, 2020). These many and varied struggles have impacted the very foundation of teaching and learning in higher education. As such, instructors are considering how to make a greater effort to be compassionate in collegiate teaching. Thus, this chapter is focused on examining the various ways instructors can foster compassion in their classrooms and the importance of compassionate pedagogy on student learning, persistence, and wellbeing during a global crisis.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A GLOBAL CRISIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 is a rapidly emerging pneumonia-type disease with origins originating in the Hubei province of China (Esakandari et al., 2020; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a). Coronavirus is a highly infectious disease which negatively and rapidly affects individuals of all ages and socio-economic status with diverse and varied symptoms “ranging from asymptomatic/mild symptoms to severe illness and death” (Esakandari et al., 2020, p. 1). Increased globalization and air travel allowed the virus to spread around the globe subsequently affecting millions of people and disrupting global, national, and regional economies (WHO, 2020a). For most, COVID-19 is now woven into the fabrics of daily life and continues to change how we engage with spaces and places while shifting approaches to interaction(s). This is most evident by government mandated changes in social-distancing practices (i.e., staying six feet apart from others and encouraging limits on social gathering) and enforcing the use of masks around the nose and mouth with the hopes of managing spread and infection rates (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2020a; WHO, 2020b). The World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a disease outbreak and public health emergency with the number of those infected or dead around the globe to be in the millions (Eskandari et al., 2020; WHO, 2020c).

Global crises are complex, emotional, events that typically receive reactions from the public which stem from violations of our expectations (Coombs, 2009; Coombs & Holladay, 2005) where social, economic, and health implications drastically increase perceived instability. The WHO, Center for Disease Control (CDC), and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have classified COVID-19 as a pandemic and global crisis based on the specificities of intercontinental disease transmission and spread (CDC, 2020b; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

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