

Compassionate Teaching: Let's Plan For That To Stick After The Pandemic

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Teaching large courses can be challenging for many reasons. One of the main challenges for me, as an extroverted professor, is being able to get to know all of my students in a personal way. Frankly, it is a challenge to even know all of their names. However, during the pandemic it was even more challenging not being able to see them in person. While I am usually able to learn a few names of my most outspoken students and/or those students that sit in the front, seeing boxes with names on Zoom made it almost impossible to learn and retain names unless students turned their cameras on and answered my questions, which often landed in “Zoom-space” with no response. Out of the 212 students registered for my course, I had three students turn on their cameras, and those are the only names that stood out to me.

However, while I do not remember names of all the other students, I do remember incidents that happened to them throughout the semester whether good or bad. After hearing about a weekly check-in forum that another professor used (Thanks, Dr. Megan Lupek!), I decided to tweak it, and implement it in my courses. When I first set it up, I was prepared that I might not get any responses, but I felt it was necessary given the teaching environment (large, online class with little to no group work). I was well aware of what research had shown related to college students during the pandemic, such as students’ mental health suffering from isolation.

The form was a very simple Google Form that just asked:

1. How are you feeling today? Happy, Sad, Stressed, Lonely, Overwhelmed, Worried.
2. What is one piece of good news that you can share today?
3. What challenges (if any) are currently impacting your ability to do coursework?
4. Is there anything I can do to help make life/things/class better for you?

I announced that the form would reside on our classroom website and would be available at anytime they wanted to utilize it to check in/share updates on how they were doing. I was so surprised to see that immediately after announcing and opening the form, I received several responses. Some students were eager to share their good news while others were quick to share that they had some challenges going on in their lives.

After some thought and deliberation, I decided to announce a summary of the forms in class once a week (no names mentioned). During the reminders at the beginning of class, I shared a graph from the Google form that provided percentages on how everyone was feeling (based on

those students that had completed the form). I also shared the good news of their classmates as well as the challenges (as long as they were not personal/identifiable).

When initially deciding to use this form, I did not consider the impact it would have on me or my students. Some students completed the form at 3:00 am to share they were struggling with assignments; others completed the form on the weekends to share they were home visiting family and recharging. However, others shared when they lost a loved one to COVID-19 and expressed how challenging it had been, while others shared that they were struggling with the isolation associated with COVID-19. Some of the feedback I received regarding the form and sharing the highlights from it included:

- Just completing the form has made me feel better since I know that someone is listening/reading and concerned about me and my well-being.
- Hearing the good news of my classmates cheers me up each week. I enjoy knowing that others have something good going in their life.
- Being able to vent at any time of the day in a non-confrontational format has been so helpful throughout the semester. I have completed the form several times already.
- Knowing that I am not the only person struggling during this time has been helpful to me.

One of the key learnings and take-aways from this experience has been the compassion I developed for my students. While I was not a heartless professor, I know that I was not nearly as compassionate before this experience this past semester (during the pandemic). I know that as professors I/we often feel compelled to show “tough love” and push students to “grow up”. However, I/we should also consider and approach our students from a place of caring and concern before anything else. Since I teach an entry level course, many of these students are experiencing being away from their home and their family for the first time for an extended period of time.

All in all, after the pandemic, my growing compassion for my students will stick. I will continue utilizing this form and other mechanisms to connect and hear from my students whether online or in-person. It is my hope that this will be the case for all professors as we transition into trying to get back to what we might consider our “normal”. Our students deserve, need, and require this of us.