

The Practice of Caring: An Intentional Shift from Caring *about* Students to Caring *for* Students

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The past year pushed me toward a blend of planning and improv. Working at a rapid pace, I reworked my studio-based design courses, learned new technologies to deliver content online, and strived to adapt to my students' needs. Though, as I reflect on what teaching strategies or innovations I will retain, I look beyond the new technologies, and I center on the *caring*. Is caring a teaching strategy? Early in my academic career, a teaching style survey revealed that one of my dominant traits was nurturing, and I must admit, I was sheepish about confessing these results to my colleagues. I was left wondering what it meant to be a nurturer, and how I could maintain rigor and high expectations to adequately prepare students. Despite my concerns to the contrary, the pandemic affirmed that connection and compassion were crucial to learning, engagement, and well-being. Going through this shared experience of pandemic learning with my students was unique, and it was perhaps this humanizing and humbling time that helped me to more easily recognize and prioritize the challenges students were facing outside of the classroom. Nevertheless, students have always entered the classroom with challenges, unique stories, diverse learning preferences, varied access to resources, and even basic-needs insecurities. What felt different during the pandemic were the intentional practices aimed at noticing and caring. Geneva Gay (2018) writes, "Caring is one of those things that most educators agree is important in working effectively with students, but they are hard-pressed to characterize it in actual practice, or to put a functional face on it that goes beyond feelings of empathy and emotional attachment" (pp. 57–58). I saw a collective shift in caring *for* (not simply *about*) students, which Gay defines as "active engagement in doing something positive to affect" our students' well-being (2018, p. 58). When I consider what will stick, it will be the practice of caring— the activities that promote connection, self-care, and compassion.

Connection

Prior to the pandemic, I often used conversation starters in the classroom to build rapport. I underestimated how important these activities were for connection and motivation to learning. Courses are content-driven, but the sense of community is strengthened by non-course related content. It was the conversations before and after class that my students and I were desperately missing. In the shift to remote learning, my class used Padlet (an online collaboration space) for these discussions, with prompts such as, "post a meme about how you are feeling today" or "share your favorite podcast." This platform worked well for diverse learners who could share in different formats (text, images, sound clips, videos). I hosted a pet parade for the first few minutes of class, where students could introduce their cats and dogs. We even had plush pets

participate. We used the chat feature to share our “favorites” (music, restaurants, movies, books). I surveyed students on their “reverse” wish list: five things you would never want to do. These activities matter because, as Gay (2018) points out, “school achievement is always more than academics” and “learning takes place in context” (p. 204). These were not only community-building exercises, as they served to identify funds of knowledge, experiences, and learning-style preferences around which I could adjust course content to be more relevant and appeal to student interests.

Self-Care

To create a climate of care, I must model self-care and prioritize physical and mental health, work-life balance, and time for connection. The pandemic illuminated these challenges and their importance, causing me to examine how to better reflect this in my teaching practice. In addition to sharing mental health resources as I have previously done, I incorporated wellness activities adopted from workshops. I had students “recenter” by writing down upcoming tasks causing stress in the moment. Another time, students created a list of things (under \$5) that bring them joy and were directed to do something from their list every day. To reflect on work-life balance, students compared their top three values to a pie chart representing their time spent during an average week. Moving forward, I will continue to weave self-care practices into a holistic college learning experience, not only so that students may feel supported in my classroom, but to empower them as active participants in the practice of caring.

Compassion

During a busy time juggling different roles, I made an error and a colleague responded with, “It’s nice to know that you are human too!” Their compassion gave me much-needed perspective. I recognize my responsibility to align my courses and policies to professional expectations and hold students accountable. At the same time, over this past year I found myself choosing moments where someone needed my compassion more than a lecture on professionalism. My experience tells me that there will be instances when students take advantage, but to build entirely rigid and inflexible practices around this potential comes at a cost. When a student would come to me distraught at having missed a detail or deadline, I would first pause to see the student as a whole person: How have they been affected by this past year? Are they experiencing pandemic-, online-, or racial battle-fatigue? What else might be going on in their life? Compassion alone is not enough to serve students. Gay reminds us, “Caring is grounded in attitudes but must exemplify actions” (2018, p. 65). Looking inward, I examined if my practices and policies were inclusive. I became more resolute to the work of being an ally, advocate, and activist for diverse student populations, so that my compassion could be informed by awareness and lead to meaningful action.

This past year emboldened the nurturer in me and gave me new insights into a career-long question of what I think that means. If I am intentional and authentic, I can build a pedagogy around caring, and put caring into practice. I can maintain high expectations, while creating an

inclusive, caring space where students can meet them. I can be a *nurturer*— with practices that empower my students and encourage their growth.

References

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.