

**Who Belongs in Class?
Culture, Community, Caring- Surviving COVID**

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Years ago, I remember walking out of my house and thinking families struggle when moms or dads go to work or back to school to further their education. The balance of home and school is difficult when a parent returns to school. Personally, I had shifted from a corporate career in finance to a calling in higher education. It was preceded by feeling that I was not helping make the world a better place, but aiding people in debt accumulation. I was living an unbalanced life. I saw significant numbers of students struggling to earn a college degree and balance their personal responsibilities. As a first-generation student from Appalachia, I shared a common bond with these students. I had experienced the feelings of not fitting in, thinking I wasn't smart enough, and that I didn't belong. I had a serious case of *imposter syndrome*, defined by these persistent perceptions and feelings of inadequacy.

Beyond the classes, I found students needed support to feel that they belonged in the classroom. Students in my courses are mostly non-traditional adult learners, i.e., students who are working full-time jobs and supporting families while completing college degrees. Some are part-time students or working part-time, but most are literally balancing the *second shift* life, one where they work outside the home and then come home to the *second job* of handling home and family responsibilities. Recognizing students' lived experiences of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) are very important to building a connected community of learners in this environment.

Any disruptive or traumatic event may tip the balance. COVID-19 was a major disruption that caused a need for grief and trauma support. My own life shifted terribly when I awoke to the call

no military mother ever wants to receive, that my Army son had died in an accident. I thought I knew how to help students. I realized I had missed something about how trauma and grief intersect our lives in work, school, family, and social groups. Awareness of the emotional toll that trauma and grief take on individuals and how it impacts their work and studies is important to building good andragogical practices. In other words, being emotionally and intellectually aware of how what we do in our class impacts our students. For those of us who teach online, the challenge to connect to our students is exacerbated by a digital divide. It is easy to distance ourselves from our students through the impersonal computer monitor and email communication.

Pre-COVID-19, I utilized technology to interact with students. I communicated via email, announcements, and videos online. This is typical in asynchronous online classes. Now, I hold drop-in sessions via Zoom to connect with online students. I encourage them to schedule individual meetings via phone, Zoom, Microsoft Teams or whatever works, to talk about class and other concerns. I am vulnerable. Sometimes I cry with them, when they tell me about losing a loved one, their sick kids, the job that is asking them to work unreasonably long hours, or the loved one lost to addiction. I also started sending an email/announcement to my seniors about surviving to graduation.

Scholars tell teachers to be culturally aware, practice cultural intelligence, and be sensitive to student's diverse needs. How do we do this? How do we survive as faculty when we are experiencing just as many stressors and traumatic life events as our students? Do we have the emotional, intellectual, and physical capacity to support them? Or can we build a co-existence with our students?

I had to get real. I only have so much capacity and so do students — we survive together. I cannot sacrifice myself to support others. I am honest about my experiences and expectations. I tell them that it may not be easy, but it will be worth it. I stay connected with many of them after

they leave my class and college. We belong in this class, this college, and this community together—with all our different experiences, backgrounds, wants and needs.

Teaching is not easier online and the impacts of the pandemic, grief, and trauma on myself and students intertwine with the pre-existing struggles of working parents, adult learners, care givers, and work-life balance. For example, my grandmother always asked if we wanted something to eat when we visited her. Feeding us was her way of providing care for others. I cannot physically feed my students. I can “feed” their need to belong by providing academic support that recognizes the emotional need for encouragement. Prior to my own experience, I was unaware that grief and trauma can fog the brain, cause short-term memory issues, and negatively affect an individual’s ability to connect. “Feeding” others does not equate to starving ourselves. When I bring my authentic/real self to the learning community with my students I have to “feed” both of us. The efforts to support others requires personal energy that can lead to burn out.

As a business professor, I believe it is my responsibility to teach emotional intelligence-awareness of self and others, encourage attention to details, stress the importance of time management, and model effective communication. Sharing when these areas have been difficult for me, how *imposter syndrome* has dictated my internal scripts, and how I have overcome these challenges is part of “getting real” with learners. When students feel a sense of belonging, they are more open to supporting their classmates and alerting me to issues before they become success barriers. Cultivating a supportive, culturally aware learning community strengthens student self-confidence, counteracts the negative impact of *self-doubt*, and fosters positive recognition of their value as adult learners. We must learn to protect our emotional, mental, and physical resources and to very intentionally decide where to spend them.

Sharing my lived experience of continuing my education as a working parent, my personal loss, and working through grief helps foster trust. I have made changes over the last few years that strive to build inclusive courses acknowledging differences in socioeconomic situations,

family structures, employment, time availability, and lived experiences. Cultural intelligence coupled with caring builds an online supportive community. I recommend educating ourselves on trauma and grief so we can support our students in our communications. When students see that we as teachers are real people navigating trauma, grief, joy, and lifelong learning and successfully coming out the other side, it models successful survival for our students. Additionally, it communicates that they belong and are not imposters.