

It's Time to Move Beyond Empathy: Purposefully Building Compassion into Curriculums

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COVID-19 continues to present teaching and learning challenges. As a result, many students still experience stressors in learning contexts. Calls for teachers to engage in practices that acknowledge and respond to students' challenges and stressors are emerging during the pandemic. This short essay highlights how compassionate pedagogy may be used as a framework to actively alleviate students' stressors by (re)framing our understanding of time. Time is a non-renewable resource that often contributes to students' feelings of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety. I use my personal experiences with implementing rolling deadlines, forecasting a semester schedule, and foregoing timed exams as strategies to enhance students' learning while minimizing teaching fatigue. My experience with moving beyond empathy to engage compassion through course policies and procedures introduces future directions where time may be used to further understand the teaching-learning process

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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, instructors continue making adjustments to teaching and students continue to adjust their approach to learning. One important outcome of teaching and learning during the pandemic is the call for compassionate pedagogy (see Meluch & Hannah, 2021). As teachers continue to work with students who may struggle with their learning and coursework because of COVID-19, one strategy to consider is (re)framing our understanding of time using compassionate pedagogy as a framework. By using my teaching experience(s), I outline three time-oriented strategies to communicate compassion to students through course policies and procedures while introducing implications for both teacher and students.

Compassionate Pedagogy: Putting Empathy into Action

Compassionate pedagogy adopts the central tenants of compassion and transfers them into classroom contexts (see Wright-Mair, 2020). Meluch and Hannah (2021) define compassionate pedagogy as “a pedagogical framework through which instructors cultivate a classroom culture whereby they identify student struggles and respond to those struggles in ways that seek to ease them” (p. 6). Contemporary scholars have built upon the traditional understanding of compassion to include action (Gibbs, 2017). For example, Hao (2011) connects compassionate pedagogy to action by outlining concepts like “feeling towards students' needs,” (p. 94) understanding our own and our students' needs, and “develop[ing] open communication with students” (p. 96).

Considering compassion can be communicated and approaches to communicating compassion affect student populations (see Jazaieri, 2018), how instructors use communication is important to student well-being. By adopting compassionate pedagogy practices and tethering it to course policies and procedures, instructors and students may have the opportunity to mutually benefit from compassion.

Two Different Semesters, Same Intention

Instructors who attempt to alleviate student stress on a regular basis may risk experiencing compassion fatigue. Specifically, instructors may begin to feel the effects of burnout (Kaufman & Schipper, 2018). This may result in feelings of stress by attempting to alleviate the stress of students.

During the 2020-2021 academic year I was an instructor of record for two undergraduate, introductory-level, interpersonal courses. I was encouraged to use compassionate pedagogy by my course director during the pandemic. Most students enrolled in these courses were traditional first- and second-year students at a mid-sized, 4-year, public university in Appalachia. Most students were enrolled full-time. Students were typically employed, and some students were university athletes. No students disclosed any parenting responsibilities during the pandemic and one student reported full-time legal guardianship of two elderly grandparents.

The first semester (Fall 2020) was mostly successful, but I was experiencing difficulties keeping up with the need for compassion given the many unique and demanding situations students were experiencing. As such, I brainstormed strategies for the following semester to alleviate my students' stress while also creating moments of grace for myself through self-compassion. I discovered the most efficient and effective way to achieve goals was to rework my understanding of time and how to use it compassionately.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I approached this course with a rigorous structure intending to minimize students' uncertainty. This idea came in the form of hard deadlines that reflected a pattern over the course of the semester (e.g., quizzes always due on Mondays and reflections on Fridays). Many students struggled to meet deadlines and turn in quality work. At the beginning of the spring semester in 2021, I taught the same course with a more flexible approach and allowed students to feel certainty and control by emphasizing autonomy. Students frequently met deadlines and turned in meaningful, quality, work. Although time was an element of consideration during the fall and spring semesters of 2020-2021, an important consideration for instructors is how to use time to a student's advantage.

Students experienced a variety of stressors at the outbreak of COVID-19. By individually helping each of these students with individual circumstances, I experienced fatigues of all types and found I was more stressed by attempting to make individual and unique accommodations. Moving forward, I chose to communicate compassion by adjusting course-wide policies and procedures to anticipate students' needs during the pandemic.

Strategies for Communicating Compassion

The first strategic consideration is to use rolling deadlines which allows "students to manage their course production" (Withington & Schroeder, 2017, p. 3) and communicates acknowledgement for and understanding of students' schedules and responsibilities outside of the classroom. In this interpersonal course, I chose to introduce rolling deadlines through two relevant analogies.

First, I likened rolling deadlines to paying bills. We generally have a certain number of days to pay a bill and we can choose when to remit payment if we meet the deadline. I applied that same level of flexibility to assignments. Students have different "time budgets" and how they budget that time is entirely up to them. Next, our courses were treated like a traditional Monday through Friday job. Assignments are intended and designed to be due on Friday to avoid doing work over the weekend. Students were encouraged to budget their time, but they could make submission choices without repercussion or judgement. A rolling deadline policy actively alleviates stress by giving students more autonomy and time that they otherwise would not have had. Rolling deadlines are compassionate as they are a response to time-induced stressors experienced by students.

Another consideration is to include a forecast of the upcoming course schedule. I chose to publish a VoiceThread every Monday morning outlining detail of the upcoming two weeks. The forecast outlined three main segments: (1) "where we have been" (e.g., the past); (2) "where we are" (e.g., the present); and (3) "where we are going" (e.g., the future). This served as a training tool to teach students to "plan their work and work their plan" (e.g., strategize time management). Given that students are usually in several classes at once, this alleviated confusion caused by the many ways other courses were facilitated. Students anticipated the forecast every week and this actively alleviated uncertainty concerning course expectations and timelines.

Finally, facilitating untimed exams and quizzes is an example of communicating compassion. Students may experience frequent disruptions due to varying living situations. For some students, this resulted in the inability to complete an exam in a certain amount of time or in one sitting. When I was told that my student who worked three jobs was trying to complete exams at work during dinner breaks, I considered that learning was potentially disrupted because of students' working environments. Moving forward, exams were administered using rolling deadlines and released on Monday morning via the learning management system. Students used an instructor generated password to enter and exit the exam as needed.

Implications for Students

Recent research shows that students value flexibility in times of crisis (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) (Tatum & Frey, 2021). Past research demonstrates that students benefit from instructors who communicate support (see Thompson & Mazer, 2009). In this case, considering students' time and purposefully implementing course wide policies that actively alleviate time-oriented stressors communicate flexibility and support to students.

I note two major changes between Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 concerning rolling deadlines and untimed exams. First, students in the Spring 2021 semester who took exams and quizzes untimed had a higher completion rate than students in Fall 2020 who took timed exams. Second, students in the 2021 semester had a higher completion rate for assignments when allowed extra time through rolling deadlines than students in Fall 2020.

I speculate that students were more likely to enjoy the course and its material when they were given flexible time to engage with concepts and assignments. When students were exposed to new living and working situations due to COVID-19, their schedules undoubtedly shifted. For some, their ability to use time effectively was drastically impacted. When students knew they had extra time, they communicated feeling less stressed than if they were racing the clock during a pandemic. In some situations, students moved home and had less autonomy and agency in their living spaces, which could cause time constraints that were not anticipated.

Implications for Instructors

These insights may be helpful and meaningful to others considering the long-term impact of COVID-19 in learning contexts. Three implications resulted from my experience: (1) diminished compassion fatigue; (2) less grading fatigue; and (3) lower levels of burnout.

When students were individually communicating the need for extensions through email and in virtual meetings, I noticed a lot of emotion that triggered an immediate and strong empathetic response from myself. Therefore, I engaged in a lot of emotional labor while combating compassion fatigue. Implementing course-wide changes was a practical response to students' needs that did not require as much emotional labor as did my repetitive participation in emotional meetings with students.

Additionally, I experienced less grading fatigue and burnout because of my ability to protect my time. I felt less overwhelmed and overworked because of a decrease in late submissions. Instead, students submitted work in a timely and flexible manner. I was able to plan and organize my time more efficiently. This gave me greater perceptions of control over my working life. My course director's support and encouragement to implement compassionate pedagogy gave me clear job expectations. This increased my autonomy and authority to make decisions that would have otherwise felt difficult to make considering traditional understandings of pedagogy tend to value inflexible structure. Overall, I felt greater job and teaching satisfaction.

Lessons Learned

My foremost lesson learned is that communicating compassion to students during difficult times is most achievable and effective when also engaging in self-compassion. Like the aircraft oxygen mask instructions state, we should secure our own mask before attempting to help others. I encourage instructors to show self-compassion (put on your oxygen mask first) before attempting to show compassion to others (assist the other person). Self-compassion is likely to look and feel different given the diversity of instructors and courses in higher education. However, do not be afraid to benefit from compassion as your students do.

The classroom dynamic may be impacted when compassion is cast as a wide net rather than on an individual basis. Some students may not feel comfortable disclosing stressors or coming to an instructor for help. Implementing compassion through course policies and procedures allows students the opportunity to benefit equitably without feeling the pressure to engage in disclosure or “prove” their need(s). Although less individualized compassion likely has drawbacks, this is a way to create a compassionate classroom culture. I believe this approach is a building block to creating compassionate classrooms where both students and instructors can benefit from and show compassion for themselves, peers, and instructors.

Additionally, I learned that applying compassionate pedagogy did not diminish our course rigor. Being compassionate did not mean I placated my students during the pandemic. Rather, I was more intentional with the way I facilitated learning and designed assignments. For example, I revisited reflection questions and shifted from weekly to bi-weekly reflections. Students were more thorough and thoughtful when they were answering thorough and thoughtful questions. Granting more time to answer meaningful questions was a compassionate form of rigor. I now understand rigor as an outcome of the quality of students’ critically approached work, not an outcome of more work. Rigor is implemented compassionately when instructors (re)consider that rigor does not necessarily have to mediate the teaching-learning process. Instead, I reflected on rigor as an outcome of my teaching.

The last lesson learned is that time matters. I intend on minimizing stigma associated with undergraduate students’ time in that there is an assumption that school (or even one course in particular) is all the students should focus on (and are focusing on). COVID-19 lends new insights into time-related demands undergraduates feel in a new age of higher education. The author encourages instructors to conceptualize time as a resource that they could give when using compassion strategically in their course.

Future Directions

Future directions include additional reflection on time in learning contexts, especially from an instructional communication lens. Time may be a useful variable to consider when exploring students’ experiences in classrooms and learning outcomes. Another avenue for future research may be how instructors experience time in their role as course facilitator. Time may also be a unique variable to explore topics such as instructor burnout, emotional labor, and communication behaviors (e.g., misbehaviors). Lastly, students may understand the concept of a resource from diverse perspectives. The diverse understanding of and use of time may introduce new and valuable insights into the teaching-learning process. Given the diversity of student populations and course offerings in respective departments, instructors should consider how approaches to rolling deadlines might differ depending on the course and assignment. These differences may develop a greater understanding of how approaches to rolling deadlines influence students’ experiences.

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