Compassionate teaching yields the most benefits (opinion)

Authored by
Hannah L. Schacter, Shanique G. Brown, Ana M. Daugherty, Susanne Brummelte and Emily Grekin
on December 1, 2021 - 3:00am

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of compassionate teaching, as both students and instructors have navigated extraordinarily stressful circumstances and adapted to unfamiliar settings. In fact, many students have actively voiced a need for such teaching. What, however, does compassionate teaching really look like, and is it possible to balance flexible, empathic teaching with high and rigorous academic expectations?

During the 2020–21 academic year, we participated in a learning community designed to address those questions, and in this essay we will outline some of the ideas formed through that experience. Specifically, we propose that compassionate pedagogy and student learning and achievement are not at odds with one another—rather, they can be synergized to create an ideal learning environment for both the student and the instructor. We also stress the importance of a proactive, not reactive, approach to compassionate pedagogy and suggest the following specific strategies for developing and implementing courses that ensure mutual respect, flexibility and understanding between students and instructors from day one.

Acknowledging the Stress

Often, students' frustrations about grading or assessment policies derive from a broader sentiment that their instructor does not care or understand what they are going through. For instructors, simply recognizing and communicating your understanding and empathy can help you begin building trust and shared understanding with students. You should also take the following steps.

- **Recognize potential learning barriers.** At the beginning of the semester, openly discuss with the class the fact that many students struggle with challenges that disrupt their ability to learn. These challenges can range from technological difficulties, like a poor internet connection, to social and familial responsibilities, such as taking care of a child or elderly parents, to mental health struggles. Include a corresponding statement on the syllabus.
- **Provide resources.** Relatedly, provide a comprehensive list of resources that can help students manage any potential barriers to learning and talk through them on the first day of class. That list can include both traditional academic resources, like tutoring services and counseling centers, as well as others that are typically talked about less in classrooms, such as food banks, low-cost housing resources, low-cost childcare services, crisis lines, resources for domestic violence victims and the like. Tell students that if they have other resources to add to the list, they may do so. The document can be collaborative.
- **Identify your own stressors.** Recognizing and acknowledging the impact of the pandemic on your experience as an instructor can benefit both your students and yourself. For students, hearing about struggles faced by the instructor can promote a sense of shared humanity, which can then enhance connection and reciprocal empathy. For yourself, being aware of your own mounting distress or burnout can help you re-evaluate how you invest your time and whether you are spending enough time on self-care.

Being Flexible With Assignments

In any given semester, it is common for instructors to receive student requests for paper extensions, exam makeups or assignment redos. You may feel conflicted about whether to make one-time exceptions for individual students, particularly when they involve personal judgments of what "counts" as a valid excuse for the missed assignment or poor grade and what is "fair" for other students. At the same time, students may feel frustrated and invalidated when their oftentimes distressing circumstances—an ill family member, mental health difficulties—are deemed inadequate grounds for flexibility.

To minimize situations that require you to make ad hoc decisions and to maximize students' opportunities to succeed even in the face of unexpected and uncontrollable stressors, we suggest you build flexibility into the fabric of your course structure using techniques such as the following.

- **Offer flex passes.** At the beginning of the semester, give each student one or more "free passes" that they can use for 24-hour extensions on any assignment at any time throughout the semester. You should also emphasize that when students use a flex pass, they do not need to explain or justify why they are using it. The "no questions asked" nature of the flex pass can help alleviate anxiety among students who may not feel comfortable disclosing their personal circumstances to an instructor.
- **Drop the lowest grade.** Particularly for courses that include multiple assessments, providing the option to drop a low test or assignment score can significantly alleviate students' concerns over grades. Often, panicked requests for extensions or makeup exams become more common when students are faced with only a few high-stakes assessments throughout the semester.

Creating a grade-drop policy can help you communicate that you understand that stuff happens and can give students a safety net that allows them to focus more on learning and less on worrying about grades.

- **Give choices in assignments.** Students are likely to feel more agency and flexibility and recognize the personal importance and applicability of learning content when they have choices about specific assessment methods. For example, instructors can provide multiple topics for an assessment throughout the term that the student can choose based on their interest and the due date. Although potentially less feasible in large courses, smaller classes provide an ideal opportunity to give students several options for how to complete an assignment, such as reflecting on an assigned reading via written essay, video development or podcast recording. Given that a central goal for instructors is to promote students' learning and comprehension, allowing students to "choose their own adventure" when it comes to assignment format encourages them to capitalize on their strengths.
- **Allow multiple submission attempts.** Online tests can be a great tool for you to assess students' learning, and scheduling several exams throughout the semester provides students with intermittent checkpoints that help them stay on track with the material. To maximize students' comprehension and minimize potential stress about missed points across repeated assessments, you can offer multiple submission attempts for certain assignments. Allowing students to take a test multiple times, for example, allows them to improve their scores and understanding, especially if feedback is provided for wrong answers. Learning management systems typically allow easy programming of automatic feedback for incorrect exam responses, which can help alleviate your time commitment.

Creating a Culture of Communication

Not all students are comfortable initiating communication with their instructors, or they may feel like a nameless face in the lecture hall—or, as of late, Zoom room. Especially in online environments where interaction is already more limited, such feelings of anonymity or lack of connectedness may undermine students' trust that you have their back. You can combat these feelings and create a culture of communication by using the following techniques.

- **Encourage communication.** Although most instructors include information about office hours and how to contact them on a course syllabus or during the first day of class, you should regularly remind students of those options. You should also express enthusiasm about communicating with students and provide specific communication guidelines. For example, remind students that you are eager to talk to them ("I would love to speak with you during my office hours!"), specify the structure of such sessions ("You can drop in for as long or as briefly as you like") and indicate the content of office hours ("You can just stop by to introduce yourself or ask questions about course material"). At the beginning of the semester, in addition to, or as an alternative to office hours, it may be helpful to schedule times to discuss specific issues, such as hosting periodic coffee hours to talk about challenges with technology or career options. Finally, via a weekly announcement or at the beginning of each lecture, consistently remind and encourage students to reach out to you if they have questions, concerns or need any accommodations. During class or in an online forum, simple acts like thanking a student for a question or giving credit for a suggestion can also encourage other students to participate. And offering to stick around after a lecture—whether in person or via a Zoom breakout room—gives students a chance to ask questions they may not be comfortable asking in front of the whole class.
- **Reach out.** You also should take the opportunity to reach out to students who may be struggling or need extra encouragement. Before they fall too far behind, get in touch with students who have missing assignments or are less active online. Although that may seem like a daunting task if you are teaching a large lecture class, learning management systems often have automated methods for contacting students who may be falling behind. For example, on Canvas, you can send a bulk message to all students who have not yet turned in an exam or assignment. Those messages may be especially helpful just before a big deadline, and they will also help students feel supported and seen.
- **Foster transparency.** Create a clear and predictable schedule and grading rubric at the beginning of the semester, and stick to it. Provide students with reminders for upcoming assignments or automate reminders using announcements in your email or learning management system. Try to minimize any surprises when it comes to assessment, such as an unexpected paper that gets assigned midsemester. By providing students with all the tools they need to succeed and maintaining predictability, you will promote greater trust and communication.
- **Promote safety.** At the beginning of the semester, communicate to students how you will ensure a safe and inclusive environment for them. Examples may include a discussion about rules of internet etiquette, as well as syllabus statements and corresponding discussions about diversity, equity and inclusion—and concrete ways that you plan to uphold such values in the course. You should also communicate to students that feedback is not a judgment of their ability but is meant to be developmental. Encouraging a feeling of security and limiting any fear of failure will help to create a psychologically safe learning environment. Given that students ultimately learn better in such an environment, it is important to provide this support from day one.

Looking Ahead

Although classrooms may look a bit more normal this academic year, we have learned many lessons about the power of compassionate teaching over the past 20 months that can enhance future instructional methods, regardless of the specific format or context. By actively fostering a sense of instructor-student trust and flexibility from the get-go, you can mitigate (though not necessarily eliminate) the need for difficult, ad hoc decision making down the road. And when unexpected circumstances do come up, you'll be better able to deal with them in ways most likely to optimize student learning. Ultimately, effective teaching and compassionate teaching are synergistically linked, and it is in a compassionate classroom where students reap the greatest educational *and* social-emotional benefits.

Teaching and Learning [1]

Hannah L. Schacter, Shanique G. Brown and Ana M. Daugherty are assistant professors in the department of psychology at Wayne

State University. Susanne Brummelte is an associate professor and Emily Grekin is an associate professor and associate chair/graduate director in the department.