



Teaching more flexibly than ever before: A pedagogy of support

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ABSTRACT

A university professor reflects on her pedagogical approach as she aims to create more supportive environments during times of upheaval. Emphasis in three specific areas comprise this pedagogy of support: learners' sense of community and belonging, students' engagement and learning, and diverse forms of learning. Because of the high flexibility required to engage in pedagogies of support, the resulting inclusive environments foster a sense of belonging and success.

Keywords: Pedagogy, inclusive college teaching, flexible instruction, reflective teaching

INTRODUCTION

In the time since most educators across the globe began making continuous adjustments in response to the upheaval created by the global coronavirus pandemic, silver lining best practices for remote, online, hybrid, and in-person teaching and learning have surfaced. One of the biggest lessons I have learned while teaching during the pandemic is the need to scaffold not only student learning and engagement, but also promote an inclusive and supportive environment. In my ongoing work towards inclusive teaching, I try to adopt instructional practices that are flexible, deliberate, and caring (Loya, forthcoming; 2020; 2021).

Specific learning goals vary by course, but the development of writing, critical thinking, and intercultural competence skills are part of all my courses. Additionally, my instructional goals across all my courses include (1) promoting inclusive environments where everyone participates in the shared learning and production of knowledge, (2) creating affirming spaces

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that foster engagement and sense of belonging, and (3) supporting student success. To achieve these learning and instructional goals, I employ a variety of instructional techniques and assessments. Emphasis on three specific areas has become part of what I call a pedagogy of support: supporting community building, supporting student engagement and learning, and supporting diverse forms of learning and demonstrating it. In this paper, I describe the specific ways in which these three areas of support can happen in our classrooms, whether virtual or in-person. I have been teaching exclusively remotely (in synchronous virtual format) since March 2020, but these practices can easily be adapted to in-person, hybrid, or online delivery formats.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY BUILDING AND A SENSE OF BELONGING

At the beginning of class, spaces for community building are essential to help students arrive to a mindset conducive to learning. This is even more important for those students who are in home environments while attending class, so they can “enter” the academic classroom. I call this space check-in time, and I ask my students to briefly share anything they feel comfortable sharing, personal or professional, from the previous or current week. At the beginning of the semester, most students would often merely say their week was fine. Over time, they increasingly feel comfortable sharing the types of anecdotes that are shared in a physical classroom. I usually share last. Check-ins are spaces for support and celebration: We have collectively applauded when someone receives a vaccine, and cried when someone is affected by COVID-19. As a bonus, starting class this way ensures everyone is punctual, as no one wants to miss anything. Pedagogically, check-ins help me decenter my instructional power and voice, ensure everyone’s participation in community building, create group cohesiveness, and provide a sense of support and belonging, all key in student engagement and success (Loya, 2020). When possible, I also hold individual consultation times with my students (using breakout rooms in remote learning) to maintain faculty student interactions, one of the most influential factors in student success (Bain, 2004).

SUPPORTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

Student- and learner-centered pedagogies are important in any classroom to foster student engagement and learning, and during the pandemic this has become critical. Using a variety of approaches and techniques during class time that allow individual, small group, and whole-class work provides the flexibility and intentionality needed to support student engagement and learning. A well-known technique to promote participation is “think-pair-share,” where students are asked to first spend a few minutes alone thinking

about a given prompt, question, case, or project. They are then paired up with a peer (breakout rooms allow this step in virtual learning formats) to discuss their own answers, listen, and respond to their peer's answers. Lastly, they are all called back to share with the whole class. Because even timid, introverted, reluctant, or differently abled learners have had opportunities to think about their own ideas or answers before being asked to share with everyone, engagement is bolstered in ways that produce less anxiety. A key element of this technique is to allow learners the time to share without the instructor interrupting or dominating the conversation. Given the space to engage, most students will respond positively. Another technique I use to promote student engagement and learning is small group discussions, again using breakout rooms, for learners to share their work, discuss readings, answer questions, or work on case studies. I vary group composition and size. When I visit the rooms, I mainly listen. When we reconvene, groups report out and we continue whole-class conversations. Pedagogically, the revised think-pair-share and small groups allow me to build learner-centered classrooms (Weimer, 2013), and because everyone has time to speak, our space includes multiple voices and perspectives, and fosters (and expects) full responsibility in the shared peer-teaching and learning. I become a More-Knowledgeable-Other (Vygotsky, 1997) among learners.

SUPPORTING DIVERSE WAYS OF LEARNING AND DEMONSTRATING IT

Inclusive teaching (Loya, 2020) seeks to create environments where everyone shares in the reception and production of knowledge (that is, not only who can learn, but who can participate in shared learning; see Alcoff, 2001). Inclusive teaching recognizes diverse ways of learning and of demonstrating it. Adding multiple, flexible activities and assignments helps support diverse learners. Including multiple assignments bolsters students as they gain, develop, or master desired skills and outcomes. Student presentations, whether individually or in small groups, help them select and deliver content, give them a voice in class, and require them to be responsible for our shared learning. Multiple smaller assignments also reduce student anxiety, foster intellectual development, integrate formative feedback, and support student success (Bain, 2004). Students receive timely feedback and resubmit improved assignments, usually with improved writing skills. When appropriate, I include peer-review, exposing learners to different perspectives. In some of my classes I also add a self-evaluation, to give learners the opportunity to explain adverse circumstances that affected their performance, if needed (particularly as we are still learning in a pandemic). Flexible due dates for draft submissions allow students to complete required work and focus on skills and outcomes rather than grades.

CONCLUSION

Individually, none of the elements I now include in my instructional practice are new. Collectively, they have helped me create spaces where students feel supported and motivated to learn (as they have shared in anonymous feedback and end-of-class course evaluations). If learners have a strong sense of belonging, and multiple opportunities to engage, learn, and demonstrate it, more voices and perspectives are part of the shared teaching and learning. When expectations for participation are paired with opportunities for it to occur, active engagement supports all learners' success.

A pedagogy of support suggests the need for a reflective, intentional philosophy of teaching that guides practice (Loya, 2021). A first step is to (re)consider one's own values and beliefs about who are we fully including in the teaching and learning processes we guide; what are the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities we give to each student, and what role do we assign to ourselves? Next, we must think about the roles and functions of content, pedagogy, and assessments: what we include and exclude when we select course content, whose ideas are represented and whose are ignored, how we choose to present material, how engaging it is, and how we gauge learning and assign value to it. Finally, we should consider the ways in which power enters our classrooms, whether virtual or in-person; who is allowed and who is encouraged to speak, what language we use, how we interact with one another, how we empower or disempower each student to develop their own ideas. After gaining clarity on the values and beliefs that should guide our instructional practices, we are then ready to revise our practice, including activities, techniques, assessments, but most importantly, an inclusive perspective that permeates our instructional decisions.

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