Creating a caring community of learners in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Creating a caring community of learners should be at the heart of all teaching, yet caring and community-building are not a primary focus of higher education. Due to generational differences, there is a disconnect between higher education faculty and their students. However, it is essential to understand these generational differences and build a caring community of learners in college classrooms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, caring and community-building became central to all educators' practices, including higher education. Recommendations include an emphasis on building a caring community of learners in higher education now and beyond the pandemic. Specific recommendations focus on belongingness, relationships, classroom environments (in-person and online), and mental health.

INTRODUCTION

I am a former early childhood educator and teacher of children with disabilities. Caring and building relationships have always been at the heart of my teaching practice. Care is an essential part of teaching, whether it was changing diapers as an infant-toddler specialist, providing hugs from falls on the sidewalk, or giving feedback for something a child just did that they could not do previously. Murray (2021) stated, "Care is education" (p. 21) and advocates for care to be a central focus of all educators. While care is central to early childhood education, she emphasizes that some see care as separate or less important than "real learning." There is work to be done to make more

significant connections between care and education in early childhood. However, now that I am in higher education, many have separated the two or have at least made little intentional connections between the importance of care and education (Miller & Mills, 2019; O'Brien, 2010; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). However, care and relationships should be an essential part of higher education, and they both matter (Sparks, 2019).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The global pandemic is one of the only worldwide events that everyone shared and made caring for each other a primary focus worldwide. No longer were we just professors and students, doctors and patients, parents and children. In many cases, faculty afforded students more time, flexibility, and patience. In turn, students and families provided teachers and professors with flexibility, patience, and a greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of teachers. This flexibility, patience, and greater understanding between students and teachers were unprecedented in many ways.

However, the pandemic also illuminated the inequities in our many systems, most notably education and health. Sadly, patience has worn thin as time has passed, and society is pressuring teachers and schools to return to "normal" despite the pandemic continuing across our nation and the world. The pandemic highlighted the many needs of students; however, these inequities and students' needs existed before the pandemic and will continue to exist afterward.

GENERATION Z/ "I-GEN" and STEREOTYPES

Before the pandemic, there was a lot of emphasis on the current students in higher education, Generation Z or "I-Gen" (Twenge, 2017). The popular press focused on the disconnect between Generation Z and higher education (Kovinsky, 2017; Povah & Vaukins, 2017). Stereotypes about Generation Z are prominent, with most connected to negative images of their attachment to technological devices and their unreadiness for adulthood (Comfield et al., 2020). However, stereotypes limit our understanding of this generation and further divide faculty and students. Twenge (2017) shared important data about "I-Gen," essential information for anyone interacting with this current generation to know and understand through an extensive review of multiple databases. She shares insights about how and why they use technology, anxiety and mental health needs, and decreased feelings of connectivity.

Relatedly, Comfield et al. (2020) argued that "critical empathy" is needed to make connections between faculty and students to "build an academic community beyond stereotypes" (p. 130). They found that the stereotypes of

"being tethered to devices" and being "protected and privileged" are typical for Generation Z. However, they found that students in this generation also are bound to "hidden narratives" of "perfect is possible" and "I am unsafe." Together, Comfield et al. (2020) argued that these narratives challenge Generation Z students' resilience.

When discussing this current generation, Dweck (2007) popularized the notion of a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. According to Zweck, many in Generation Z have a fixed mindset, limiting their growth and resilience. However, Dewitt (2015) argued that when we emphasize that students develop a growth mindset, this focuses solely on the students and what they should do to grow. He argues that when faculty, due to stereotypes, have a fixed mindset about this current generation of students, this also limits students from developing and growing. We must focus on what we can do and control as faculty members to support students.

BUILDING CLASSROOM COMMUNITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

I argue that we must continue to use the lessons learned during the pandemic, focusing on caring and empathy for college students and faculty. All of us undoubtedly needed caring and compassion during the pandemic. However, we will all continue to require caring and compassion moving forward. College students needed care and empathy even before the pandemic. This care and compassion must be rooted in an understanding of our college students as individuals and not in stereotypes of Generation Z students. Caring is culturally situated and constructed, and we need to consider different perspectives of caring and empathy.

As a previous early childhood educator and current Early Childhood Teacher Education, I believe that "creating a caring, equitable community of learners" is at the heart of a teacher's practice (NAEYC, 2020, p. 15). A caring community of equitable learners should be at the heart of higher education. Here are recommendations for creating a caring community of learners in higher education classrooms using a lens of critical empathy (Comfield et al., 2020) to understand their needs and perspectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Belongingness – To create a caring community of learners, our students need to feel that, as an individual, they belong. Students need to know that you know them to feel belongingness in your classroom. Conducting a pre-survey at the beginning or before a class starts is helpful. Include questions about their interests, such as music, shows, movies, and games. Ask them if they

know anyone in the class. Find out if they are a transfer student. With the pandemic, ask about their experience with online courses and if they have had any in-person college classes yet. I ask my students if they feel comfortable in the School of Education and on our campus. Asking about their comfort helps give me a sense of whether the student has made connections here or not. Ask their preferred name (it may be different from your roster); learn their names, learn their pronouns, and pronounce their names accurately. Our names and the correct pronunciation of our names matter and are essential to our identity.

Relationships – Relationships matter, yet faculty and students feel disconnected. Relationships need to focus on connections between faculty and students and between students to students. Communication is at the heart of building any relationship. As faculty, communicate through multiple means. Be prompt with your communication (email back as soon as possible). Allow the students to get to know you as an individual. Share stories about yourself. Make connections between your experiences in the field and what they are learning. Share information about yourself as a college student. Be genuine and honest. Share times that you failed, made mistakes, or took a different path. This sharing helps the students get to know you, but it also normalizes failure and change and helps students see these as opportunities for growth.

Students need to build relationships with each other, and your classroom can be an excellent place for this to happen while the students are learning the course content. It is well-known that collaborative and cooperative learning supports students' academic content knowledge. Be sure that students know each other's names. I use back and front tent cards with preferred names to learn student names, and the students can learn each other's names too. Share common interests from your pre-survey; for example, I have shared word clouds of favorite bands/singers. Mix-up groups, both in-person and online, so students interact with a range of students. Allow students to have opportunities to self-select groups, especially as they develop relationships together. Take a short amount of time to allow students to share what is happening on campus to learn things to do and connect with common interests. Students participated in a small group online learning community during the pandemic during my asynchronous course. These were self-selected (I had had all of the students before), and they could choose topics connected to the class to discuss and share. The students shared that these groups were helpful to both learning the course content and keeping connected with their peers during remote learning.

Classroom Environment (In-person and online) – The municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, hold a concept of the "environment as the third teacher." This concept means that children can and should learn from a

carefully constructed, aesthetically pleasing environment with open-ended and accessible materials. I believe in higher education, and especially now, given the significant shift to online learning, we need to consider our classroom environments more intentionally as learning environments, both in-person and online environments. For in-person, if there are opportunities to control the design or lighting, consider having dimmer lights for a more calming environment. If possible, move or modify the furniture to support interactions and activities. For online environments, view your online space, whether your class is fully online or you use a learning management system to supplement your in-person course, as an essential part of your classroom environment. Be sure the content is communicated clearly, with clarity and purpose. Find opportunities to create interactive communities and build relationships online.

Mental Health - Students' mental health needs are increasing on college campuses (Kitzrow, 2003; Twenge, 2017). There are general recommendations to expand counseling services (Kitzrow, 2003), but counseling centers are understaffed/unable to meet demand and over-burdened (Kafka, 2019). Jackson (2019) advocated that mental health is a priority of whole-campus. As an individual faculty member, you may feel limited in your abilities in this area. However, there are things you can do. Jackson (2019) recommended asking students what they need. Faculty can do this in a pre-survey and periodic check-ins during the semester. Faculty should include mental health resources on their syllabi. Importantly, I believe you need to discuss and share these services explicitly. Normalizing mental health needs is vital to reduce stigma. Given the lack of mental health services on most campuses, students may turn to a trusted faculty or staff member. If you share your belief in the importance of mental health, the students are more likely to see you as someone they may reach out to for help if needed.

Generation Z expresses feelings of "heightened anxiety" (Miller & Mills, 2019). As faculty members, we might contribute to students' anxiety. I often feel that we are always rushing. We must meet this standard, this assignment, and get ready for student teaching! Education majors tend to be very prescriptive to meet the mandated accreditation and state education requirements. However, we need to consider how our anxiety about meeting expectations may contribute to our students' anxiety and fuel an unnecessary cycle.

Some students are going to need more support. It is essential to reach out to students who are not completing assignments, not attending class, or not responding to your communication. More likely than not, there is a reason when a student is not responding. Sometimes faculty might think, "Oh, they just don't care," but I have found that there is usually something going on

when a student is not completing work, not attending class, or not communicating. If the students are not responsive, connect with an appropriate person in your organization, such as the Dean of Students.

CONCLUSION

Building a caring community of learners is essential in any classroom, including higher education. As teachers, focusing on developing a sense of belongingness, building relationships with your students and between students, carefully reflecting on your classroom environment in-person and online, and focusing on students' mental health will go a long way to building this community. In turn, it should address our current generation of students' needs for connection, resilience, and mental health support.

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