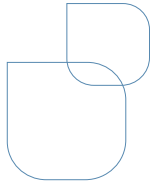


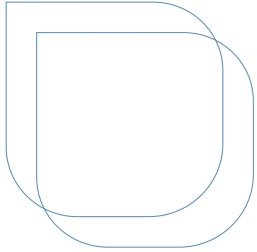
Teaching in Times of Crisis



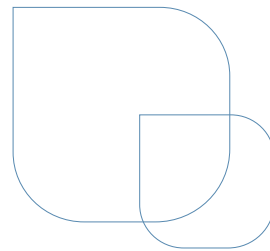


Teaching in Times of Crisis

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Teaching in Times of Crisis

Strategies for Teaching in Difficult Times

We are living in unprecedented times. Whether local, national, or international, times of crisis can have a significant impact on the college classroom and student wellbeing. Students do not necessarily need to be impacted personally or directly involved to experience anxiety or trauma. While local proximity may lead to more obvious impact on your students, the effects can be just as difficult based on “the sheer magnitude and scale (national events with wide media coverage)” and “the degree to which students are likely to identify with victim(s) of the tragedy and feel like ‘vicarious victims’ (fellow students, fellow women, fellow members of a group targeted by a hate crime, fellow Americans).” (Huston & DiPietro, 2007, p. 219).

One way of helping students cope with tragic events is to provide them opportunities to share, engage in dialogues in the classroom, reflect, and discuss with one another. Your role as faculty and how you model this process can help students cope with the situation better.

There are many possible ways to address a crisis in class, from activities that take only a moment to restructuring your entire course, and plenty in between. Again, consider that students appreciate any action, no matter how small. Listed below are some tips and strategies compiled from various sources. They should be applied with adequate consideration to the unique needs of each course section and students. UMass Boston’s Counseling Center personnel and the Dean of Students Office staff are available for consultations on these steps and strategies for teaching after a tragedy.

Take a Moment of Silence

Taking a moment of silence interrupts a course for a short time but gives everyone a chance to reflect as a part of a community and demonstrates the instructor’s sense of humanity.

Take time to talk as a group or class.

Consider providing an opportunity at the beginning of a class period. Often, a short time period is more effective than a whole class period. This serves the purpose of acknowledging that students may be reacting to a recent event, without pressuring students to speak. Introduce the opportunity by briefly acknowledging the tragic event and suggesting that it might be helpful to share personal reactions students may have.

Taking these factors into account, researchers and practitioners who study communication make the following suggestions for difficult conversations (Chaitlin 2003):

- **Consider how much time the conversation might take:** Teachers who wish to create safe places for communication need to consider how much time a difficult conversation will take and how much time they can provide for that conversation within the semester. Since a single conversation may not be enough to address the issue fully, teachers should be willing to be flexible, extending the conversation into future class sessions or over the course of the semester, as needed. The teacher should allow enough time for each conversation so that students who have difficulty opening up to the class or who need time before they can begin talking about their experiences may also be included.
- **Acknowledge both verbal and nonverbal communication:** In a discussion or conversation, silence can make a teacher feel uncomfortable, but silence and other non-verbal behaviors can be just as vital to a productive conversation as words are. It is tempting to fill silence with variations on the question asked, but doing so can inhibit students' abilities to think through the issue and to prepare to share their thoughts with their classmates. If students repeatedly need extremely long silences, however, the teacher should invite conversation as to why students do not feel comfortable sharing with their classmates.
- **Let students set the ground rules:** Allowing students to set the ground rules not only can help students create a space where they feel safe to share their thoughts, emotions, and ideas, but can also help students find power at a time when the crisis has left them feeling powerless. Ground rules should be set before the conversation begins and reiterated every time thereafter that the conversation is continued.
- **Encourage students to be empathetic listeners:** In conversation, people are often thinking about what they want to say in response rather than fully listening to the individual who is talking. In addition, if the crisis at hand is difficult to handle emotionally or if classmates feel defensive, empathic listening becomes all the more challenging. Pointing out such dynamics to students can at least encourage them to think about their positions as listeners. You might lead off by saying something like: "Often it is helpful to share your own emotional responses and hear how others are responding. It doesn't change the reality, but it takes away the sense of loneliness that sometimes accompanies stressful events. I would be grateful for whatever you are willing to share."
- **Allow freedom of participation:** If students feel uncomfortable, allow them to leave. If they feel coerced into the conversation, then they are likely to withdraw from the conversation or guard closely what they say.
- **Balance the power in the classroom as much as possible:** Ensure that no one student or group of students has more rights than others and take care that all receive equal respect.
- **Provide a predictable forum:** For continuing conversations, provide a format and space that is familiar and predictable for your students so that they feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Be prepared for blaming

When people are upset, they often look for someone to blame. Essentially, this is a displacement of anger. It is a way of coping. The idea is that if someone did something wrong, future tragedies can be avoided by doing things “right.” If the discussion gets “stuck” with blaming, it might be useful to say: “We have been focusing on our sense of anger and blame, and that’s not unusual. It might be useful to talk about our fears.”

Mind the Cognitive Load

Such events affect students’ cognitive load, as “working memory capacity is reduced immediately following an acutely stressful experience” (p. 218). This awareness may lead you to be **lenient with due dates** or adapt your syllabus for the week following the crisis to accommodate a **reduced workload**, both in terms of introducing new concepts and expecting students to exercise typical study habits. **Holding a review session** for material covered during the crisis may also be helpful.

Focus on aligning your assignments to accomplish your student learning outcomes, and consider relaxing or eliminating other important but less essential activities. For specific suggestions of how to do this while maintaining high academic standards, you can review [the webinar on Trauma-Informed Pedagogy](#) by Dr. Mays Imad, a neurobiologist who heads up the teaching and learning center at Pima Community College. (Watch the entire webinar or fast forward to 10:36 which is particularly relevant for this topic.)

Give yourself time to reflect

Remember that you have feelings, too. These thoughts and feelings about what occurred should be taken seriously, not only for yourself, but also for the sake of the students with whom you may be trying to work. Some find it helpful to write down or talk out their feelings and thoughts.

Take care of yourself

Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with stress. Eating well, resting, and exercising help us handle stressful situations more effectively and deal with students and their needs.

Provide Resources

If you are unsure of your ability to provide emotional support but feel the need to show that you are aware of its impact on your students, acknowledge the crisis by providing your students with resources for dealing with it. Below are a few suggestions:

UMB COUNSELING CENTER

The Counseling Center is committed to making sure that all students have access to care regardless of their background, immigration status, or how they identify. The Counseling Center offers same-day crisis support—by walking in during the day or by calling the 24/7 crisis line at 855.634.4135 or 617.287.5690 counseling.center@umb.edu

DEAN OF STUDENTS OFFICE

The Dean of Students Office is a central resource for students, staff, faculty, and families. The office assists our community in navigating academic, personal, and social challenges through support, advocacy, and accountability. If you are concerned about a student, or they are displaying odd or unusual behaviors, you can submit a referral on their behalf by submitting a [care referral form](#).
617.287.5800 dean.students@umb.edu

INTERFAITH CAMPUS MINISTRY

The Interfaith Center at UMass Boston is here to serve the community by offering spiritual care to students, faculty, and staff. It's primary aim is to support students as they deepen their relationship with themselves, with God, and with others. The center encourages students and members of the UMass Boston community to be faithful to their own heritage and to continue their journey by exploring, welcoming, and appreciating diversity. During the fall and spring semesters, the chaplain and campus ministers are available for individual and group conversations.
interfaith.campusmin@umb.edu

COMPSYCH GUIDANCE FOR FACULTY AND STAFF

ComPsych Guidance Resources provides support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This service is confidential, accessible, and free to all faculty, staff, and members of your household. Contact information is 844.393.4983; TDD, 800.697.0353; or www.guidanceresources.com, using the web ID UMASS

LEARNING DESIGN SERVICES

Designers are available Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m. to help you with learning design, educational technologies, ideas to improve pedagogy, and general education questions.

[Learning Design Services Website](#)

[Meet a Designer to Get Instant Help in Our Online “Drop-In” Office](#)

[Get Personal Help from a Designer: Book a Consult](#)

Additional Resources for Faculty and Teaching

[What to Say After a Student Dies \(Chronicle of Higher Ed\)](#)

A faculty guide on how to help during a campus crisis and how to avoid inflicting more harm.

[Delivering High-Quality Instruction Online \[In Response to COVID-19/When You Need to Shift to Remote Operations\]: a Faculty Playbook](#)

[Trauma-Informed Teaching](#)

[A Dozen-Plus Ways You Can Foster Educational Equity](#)

[A Trauma-Informed Lens for Addressing Race-Based Incidents on Campus](#)

[The Importance of Faculty/Staff Support During Times of Crisis](#)

[Faculty Guide to Supporting Student Mental Health](#)

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American Psychological Association's "[Tips for College and University Students: Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings](#)" (2004).