



Starting points for incorporating compassion into your teaching

Advice for teaching with compassion

The Covid-19 pandemic showed many educators the importance of teaching with compassion. But how can you incorporate compassion into your ongoing pedagogical activities? Use this guide as a starting point.

1. Know what compassion is

Some people may believe that compassion always entails giving someone what they want. That, however, is not a good strategy for achieving your courses' learning goals. Instead, compassion involves noticing the suffering of others and acting to address/alleviate others' suffering. So, in some situations, even an acknowledgment of students' plights can constitute a compassionate response.

Consider defining compassion explicitly (in a class discussion, perhaps, or maybe on your syllabus) to let students know that your classroom centers upon it – but also to help students understand that it is not a pedagogical get-out-of-jail-free card.

2. You're a role model

The way that you demonstrate compassion helps set a path for your students to follow. While we all have our bad days, aim to respond to students without strong negative emotions even as you acknowledge their frustration or disappointment. But remember to show yourself compassion, as well, which can help demonstrate to students that they should allow themselves kindness, too. Self-compassion comes from mindfulness, refutation of self-judgment, and viewing your own inadequacies as located within a context of shared human experiences.

“Teaching Spotlights” are small but impactful ways for professors to keep consistent pedagogical improvement at the forefront of their teaching practice.

Additional resources

Dutton, Jane E. and Monica C. Worline.

“Educators, It’s Time to Put on Your Compassion Hats.” *Harvard Business Publishing: Education*. April 3, 2020.

Fowlin, Julaine, Becca Sandhu, & Samantha York.

“Self-Compassionate Teaching: Putting on Your Oxygen Mask First.” Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. 2021.

Greater Good Science Center, U of CA, Berkeley.

“Compassionate Organizations Quiz.” N.d.

Hills, Melissa and Kim Peacock.

“Replacing Power with Flexible Structure: Implementing Flexible Deadlines to Improve Student Learning Experiences.” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* 10 (July 2022). doi: 10.20343/teachlearning.u.10.26

Jazaieri, Hooria.

“Compassionate Education From Preschool to Graduate School: Bringing a Culture of Compassion Into the Classroom.” *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching and Learning*. 11:1 (2018): pp. 22-66. doi: 10.1108JRIT-08-2017-0017

Rawle, Fiona.

“A Pedagogy of Kindness: The Cornerstone for Student Learning and Wellness.” *Times Higher Education*. August 20, 2021.

3. Measure your classroom

Use the free “Compassionate Organizations Quiz” provided by the Greater Good Science Center website (see additional resources column at the left of this page) to receive a score as well as suggestions for how to enhance compassion deficits.

4. Consider flexibility

Have you ever used flexible assignment deadlines? You might allow students to turn in one assignment (of their choice) late, offer a range of due dates for an assignment (rather than just the same one date for everyone), or create another approach. This kind of flexibility not only demonstrates compassion for the varied demands on students’ schedules, but can help students hone their self-regulated learning skills. If this is not a practice that you think is beneficial in your teaching context, consider telling your students the reasons why.

4. Stay aware

We are all usually aware of large-scale news that is likely to affect students’ emotions (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic quarantines, results of contentious political votes), but it is good to stay attuned to campus-level events as well so that you are aware of likely stressors for large numbers of students. While you might want to ignore such events in favor of each class period’s planned agenda, consider giving a bit of time to acknowledge such events (explaining that you are taking the time to create time for compassion for classroom members who may need acknowledgement of their emotions, OR explaining why you feel that it is important to attend to the planned material for the session, if that is what you choose to do).

5. Practice microaffirmations

Just like microaggressions can build up and create a toxic atmosphere, microaffirmations can help create a kinder, more compassionate environment. Learning to pronounce students’ names, using students’ names in conversing with them, and using people’s personal pronouns may seem inconsequential, but they help foster a climate of respect. Further, remember to point out good work (such as effort, persistence, and preparation, as well as correctness) rather than only pointing out student mistakes. While students’ grades may have to align with correctness and performance, acknowledgement of their effort can buoy students’ morale.