

10 strategies to support students and help them learn during the coronavirus crisis (opinion)

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On the day when
the weight deadens
on your shoulders
and you stumble,
may the clay dance
to balance you.

-- John O'Donohue

A few years ago, a student of mine lost his father to an unexpected illness that took a wrong turn. Two days later my student came to class. Surprised, I let my student know that if he needed to take time off to be with his family, I would later work with him to help him catch up on materials he would miss. I was giving him permission to be absent from class. He didn't want to. In fact, he said that being in class helped him forget about his problems.

His reason resonated with me. As a student, and even now as a teacher, being in class has always offered me a sanctuary where I could tune down everything else and immerse myself in a community of knowledge seekers, if only for a few hours each week.

Today, growing numbers of colleges and universities all across the country -- including Dartmouth College, Rice University and Stanford University, among many others -- are temporarily canceling their face-to-face classes to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 situation. The conversations on our campuses, as well as on professional Listservs, have turned to the topic of academic continuity plans as the nation continues to deal with the impact of COVID-19. As I look through the materials put together by various teaching and learning centers and instructional technology groups, I have noticed that the resources have focused almost exclusively on the hows of technology: tools to record lectures, create discussions and proctor exams. Yet while the technological know-how to virtually connect with our students is necessary, it is not sufficient to continue the teaching and learning endeavor.

Beyond the electronic connection, we need to connect emotionally -- especially in times of anxiety and uncertainty. As a neuroscientist, I know that emotions are key to learning. In *Descartes' Error* [1], Antonio Damasio asserts, "We are not thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think." [Recent](#) [2] [literature](#) [3] [affirms](#) [4] the importance of the affective domains in teaching and learning.

So I began to wonder about the impact such transitions will have on students and colleagues emotionally, psychologically and even physically. The current situation hits close to home for me. During the 1991 Operation Desert Storm, I was a student in middle school in Baghdad. When the bombing started, schools shut down abruptly. We didn't have internet or the ability to attend school virtually. One morning, one of my teachers showed up at my house, hand-delivered homework and reminded me to keep studying. To this day, I remember how her dedication and acts of resilience and hope helped me feel a tiny sense of normalcy during that turbulent time in my life. At night, I would sit by the candlelight to study and dream of going back to school and all the conversations I would have with my friends.

I do not question any higher education institution's decision to move their classes online or close their campuses. Rather, I am thinking about how we can teach in times of uncertainty and how we can ensure that our students continue to learn most effectively.

More specifically, I am thinking about students who don't have a safe environment at home -- for whom residence halls and classrooms have served as a sanctuary, students who have found a community within college, or students who rely on college for their sustenance and security. In other words, *most* students. So how can we, teachers, be that "dancing clays" to balance our students' mental and emotional loads, so that they may stumble just a little bit less?

Reflecting on that experience and my questions, I came up with a short list of what I would've liked my teachers to do had I been a student who was sent home due to COVID-19.

1. Email your students to remind them that you are still there for them.
2. Tell them how you are shifting your schedule to deal with the new situation and that change is part of life. Humanize yourself and make it casual and lighthearted. For example, you might talk about how, in between reading their discussion posts, you decided to start your spring cleaning, which you've been putting off forever.
3. Reflect on the notion of rigor and continue to challenge *and* support your students. As instructors, we often must balance rigor and support, and this situation might be one where students will need more support than rigor. Establishing continuity doesn't mean you increase the amount of work required of them. I say this because I worry that some of us might be fixated on the rigor of the materials presented. Let's face it -- the

rigor may suffer, and that's OK considering the situation.

4. Repeat some of the lessons you taught in class. Especially for those students who are missing the classroom environment, this will probably help activate their memory of being part of a community and remind them that they are still part of one. For example, in your email you can say something like, "Remember when we talked about this and ..."
5. Use hopeful and optimistic language, such as, "When you come back this fall ..." This will help students look forward to coming back to the campus.
6. Offer students an opportunity to exchange phone numbers and, for those who are interested, help them create a WhatsApp chat group. It can sometimes be difficult for a student to ask for a classmate's phone number.
7. Don't ignore the elephant in the room. If possible, talk about COVID-19 and fear. This is an opportunity for you to remind your students to consider the sources of their news and to beware of the large amount of misinformation.
8. Remember that students have left behind more than just their classes and academics. On both residential and commuter campuses, there are important spaces where students meet and talk about their nonacademic lives -- sports, upcoming concerts, recently discovered shows and so on. Consider creating a community discussion board for them to share what is happening in their lives, especially given the stress, fear and strains in these uncertain times.
9. Let your students know that you are there for them and that if they need help to reach out to you. Let them know that you are (I hope) in touch with counselors or mental health experts that can help them should they need to speak to someone.
10. Most important, ask each of your students how you can help them. The Persian poet Rumi says, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." Likewise, in times of uncertainty and unknowing, we can create a space where our students' voice and insights can illuminate the path we are carving out for them -- and us.

Clearly, this is not an exhaustive list, and I invite you all to add to it in the comments section below or at #hopematters4learning. Think about yourself as a vulnerable student who is trying to learn and complete a degree on an already thinly spread set of obligations. What might help you?

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[1] <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/297609/descartes-error-by-antonio-damasio/>

[2] https://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Affective+e-learning%3A+using%22+Emotional%22+data+to+improve+learning+in+pervasive+learning+environment%2E&journal=Educ%2E++Technol%2E+Soc%2E&author=Shen+L.&auti189

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[4] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed?Db=pubmed&Cmd=ShowDetailView&TermToSearch=24959160>