

# Teaching in Times of Crisis

As instructors, we are sometimes placed in the difficult position of teaching immediately after an unnerving event or a crisis—and it seems these situations are happening more and more frequently. Whether it is a school shooting, a disturbing incident on or near our campus, or national/international strife, we are often called upon to walk into class where our students, like us, are trying to process the 800-pound gorilla in the room.

Sometimes, we have time to process the event before we must teach, and to think at length about how to address it (or not). Other times, we may have much less warning. As such, it is important to be prepared ahead of time to appropriately handle difficult situations (whatever they may be) with both the students' and our wellness in mind.

Handling the situation may look different depending on the individual instructor's comfort level discussing certain topics, and on the nature of the situation. As challenging and heart-wrenching as these opportunities are, they allow for us to both support our students and engage with them as fellow human beings. As human beings, these are the moments when we can turn to each other with grace and compassion and allow our students and ourselves to give to and receive from each other what we are able and in the ways that best suit our needs. We encourage you to use the following principles as a guide to help you prepare the best way for you, and your students, to approach the classroom after a tragic or difficult event.

## Guiding Suggestions

### 1. Wellness and Compassion for Self and Students

In the immediate aftermath of a tragic event, **the most important thing is the wellness of you and your students**. Prior to addressing your students, think about how this event is impacting you. Put another way - secure your own oxygen masks before assisting others with theirs.

Students appreciate instructors who care about them, and one way to show that you care is by focusing on their wellbeing first after a crisis. Even a simple statement acknowledging the situation at hand and that you know students are hurting can be valuable. We list resources below to which you can refer students who are having a hard time—be ready to share those resources with students.

### 2. To talk about it or not to talk about it?

This is a hard question, and may be driven by the nature and severity of the crisis, and its immediacy and proximity (noting that the same event may have different immediacy and proximity for different individuals). It also may be driven by your own comfort level with these conversations; you may feel well-equipped to talk about some topics and much more leery about approaching others.

With this in mind, as a default approach, we would encourage you to **acknowledge the event or situation in your classroom**. Sometimes, just a statement that you know <the event> has happened—and that you are attentive to student emotions regarding it—may be enough. Huston and DiPietro tell us that students might think a lack of acknowledgement reflects a lack of care or concern. However, if you are uncomfortable doing so, or the issue hits you particularly hard, you might choose to take a pass on it. If you wish, you could even acknowledge your humanity by noting that the event is difficult for you to talk about and that you feel you cannot address it adequately at this time. Students will generally understand this, as they often feel the same way in their lives.

Even in the case where you might not feel comfortable facilitating conversation in your classroom after a crisis, we suggest being prepared for how you may choose to handle things if the conversation arises organically. Students may want to talk about it, and if one unexpectedly raises it in class, it is difficult to silence that conversation. Be ready for this situation before you walk into the room. Additionally, have a handout ready with campus resources.

### **3. Expert Analysis Should Wait**

It may be tempting to think you need to immediately discuss the “why” of a tragic event. We all have our expertise, and we may want to bring it to bear on the situation to help our students. Be aware, however, that students are likely not to be looking for this. We recommend that you consider addressing the issues in class down the road, particularly if the issue is in your wheelhouse and if it relates to the topic of the class. But consider that the first class after the event occurs may not be the best time to do so. Sometimes we need to let the emotions simmer before we can intellectualize the world.

### **4. Actions to Consider**

To recognize the potential mental and emotional effects of an event on your students, you might consider taking a **moment of silence** at the beginning of a

class period immediately following the event. You also might consider **minding the mental load of your students** by adjusting assignment deadlines to allow for more processing and coping time. Doing either of these communicates very clearly to your students that you care about them, and that you see them as a person first, and student second. Obviously, these considerations will tie into the immediacy, severity, and proximity of the situation, both to our campus as a whole and each individual student. Adjusting course deadlines comes with a cost, which we ought not incur lightly nor feel the need to do whenever anything bad happens in the world.

## 5. Facilitating Discussion

If you do decide to facilitate a conversation about the event in your classroom, after first addressing the mental and emotional effects of the situation, you might consider the following tips, adapted from Queen's University's Centre for Teaching and Learning:

- a. Consider how much time the conversation might take. Starting off the discussion with "Let's spend about ten minutes discussing this" might avoid things continuing ad infinitum. If the conversation is really good and you want to continue it after ten minutes, you certainly could.
- b. Make it clear that students only need to participate if they want to participate. Giving choices like this to your students shows that you care about their wellbeing first and foremost.
- c. Acknowledge both verbal and nonverbal communication. Be attentive to students who may be getting uncomfortable (is it time to lower the temperature in the room?) or who may seem to want to speak but not feel comfortable inserting themselves into the conversation.
- d. Craft community agreements with students to help facilitate difficult conversation in intentional and respectful ways. If you have not done so already during the semester, and if you do not wish to do so now, you could certainly borrow some from other sources. The source linked to above might be a good place to start.
- e. Let students set the ground rules, if this feels comfortable to you. It empowers students to be able to do this, but you should use your judgment to determine if doing this is right for your particular class, at this particular time.
- f. Encourage students to be empathetic listeners. Model that behavior yourself, even if students are saying things with which you do not agree.

## 6. When conversation gets heated...

Our students come from all different cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, and political backgrounds. We can agree or disagree about particular issues, but

there may come a point (unfortunately) where intellectual disagreement turns into hurtful, insensitive, or nasty language or actions. Familiarize yourself with resources for holding difficult conversations in class. The Faculty Senate's CAIARE Committee's Discussion Guide for [When Hate Happens On Campus](#) is an invaluable resource for you to consult. Indiana University-Bloomington also has some [useful guidelines](#) for discussion and how to defuse heated conversations. Additionally, the PowerPoints from a recent FDC series on [Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom](#) might also be helpful for you.

## 7. Share Resources

Finally, we recommend that you **share resources with your students** to help them process after a crisis, such as the [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) on campus. Ideally, you have already shared such resources with students, but this would be a good time to remind them that they exist, and that they should use them to get whatever support they need. If you have concerns about an individual student, please consider filling out a [CARE Report](#) to inform the appropriate university authorities and help address the student's needs.

You might also suggest students consider the resources available to them provided by the [Office of Wellness and Community Responsibility](#). Depending on the situation, it may also be helpful to promote offices such as the [Military and Veteran Resource Center](#), the [LGBT Resource Center](#), the [Center for Race and Ethnicity](#), the [Women's Resource Center](#), or the [International Students and Scholars Office](#).

The issues discussed here are not easy to address, and we would like to reiterate that **you are not alone in this**. Never hesitate to reach out to us in the [Faculty Development Center](#), or to [Jeffrey Bernstein](#), FDC Director, if you would like to discuss any of these issues in greater depth. And, never hesitate to talk with your colleagues about this. There is a lot of wisdom among our faculty, and we urge you to reap the benefits of working in a community of dedicated teachers and scholars.