

SPECIAL REPORT

The Path to Wellbeing:

Overcoming Burnout
and Reigniting Your
Teaching



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The promotional banner features a row of colorful speech bubbles at the top, each containing a white icon: a water drop, a citrus slice, a fork, a lotus flower, a hand holding a spoon, an eye, a hand with a spiral, and a beaker. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with a green button for more information.



Introduction

How are you? Muddling through? Or is it more accurate to say overworked, worried about my students, exhausted, or burning out? The answer might vary from day to day, but it most likely reflects the extraneous (and uninvited) circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, which have caused an unexpected, unrelenting, and unforgiving pressure for educators since March 2020.

As Shazia Ahmed and Juliet Spencer aptly state in “Why You Should Be a Selfish Instructor,” teachers have “received an onslaught of articles, trainings, and webinars on work-life balance and self-care” since March 2020. This is just one more, but we hope it brings insights, fresh thinking, and perhaps peace of mind to you as you reflect on what challenges you and how you might shift to overcome it. This report is packed with insights from educators who hope to help you regain your enthusiasm for teaching.

“Some form of tired teaching happens to all of us at one time or another during our careers,” states Maryellen Weimer in her pre-pandemic writing about burnout, “Waking up to Tired Teaching.” Yet, she continues, it is responsible to take purposeful steps to nurture our instructional health and wellbeing. Her sensible, sound advice is especially resonant now.

“Regroup and Refocus: Strategies to Avoid Professor Burnout” by Katie D. Lewis and Nicole Hesson offer specific strategies for adapting and

moving forward in the pandemic-influenced state of 2020 and 2021, but their advice holds for anyone who is losing sight of why they do what they do.

Resilience paves the way to personal growth. Seena Haines, Jenny Van Amburgh, and Susan Stein help educators stay the course with a four-skill plan to grow a resilient life: adaptability, agility, laugh-ability, and alignment, which they explain in “Wellbeing and Well-Thinking: How to Stay Healthy in Academia.”

Wellbeing and health go hand in hand, and Brian Udermann reminds us of healthy lifestyle habits that prove that small changes can produce big results.

Consider the link between learning and wellbeing, and how a supportive learning environment can make a tremendous difference for the students you teach. Michele Everett shows you how in her article “Using Teaching Practices to Support Student Learning and Wellbeing.”

Finally, a boost of endorphins may be just what you need when you feel overwhelmed, and the same holds true for your students. The last article in this collection is not about stress, or health, or wellbeing, but it should help you find a way to bring a little levity into the mundane. A meme about Igneous rock categories or a bacterial virus? Read Michael Cundall’s “Humor, Learning, and Memes” to learn how to get your students laughing while they learn.



Waking up to Tired Teaching

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

I have been wanting to write about tired teaching for some time now. Concerns about burnout are what's motivating me. Teachers can reach a place where teaching does nothing for them or their students. They don't just wake up one morning and find themselves burned out; they've moved there gradually, and it's a journey that often starts with tired teaching.

There's nothing on the subject in my big file of articles and resources. I can't remember having read about it, and I'm not sure how much we even talk about it. We do talk about being tired. Teaching is relentless. It happens every day, several times a week—or potentially 24/7 if it's online. And it's demanding. There's so much more than the actual teaching. There's considerable planning involved before each class. Plus, we need to spend time with students—those who want to talk, those needing help, and those with questions or, sometimes, complaints. There are assignments to grade and feedback to provide—all carrying the expectation of a quick turnaround. With multiple courses to teach, we do get tired, but I think we regularly confuse physical fatigue with the more serious emotional tiredness that comes from a heavy workload of always being there, always giving, and always

juggling multiple balls in the air.

Sometimes teaching gets tired because we've done what we're doing a hundred times before. Many of us teach the same courses year after year. If they are those bedrock, foundational courses, the content typically doesn't change all that much. We march through the material along well-worn paths. We know the way; we've seen



We can start by facing the reality of tired teaching, no longer pretending everything will be OK if we just get to bed earlier.

all the sights before. Every student is a unique individual, but collectively they're all novices who ask the same questions we've heard before, who get stuck in the same places, and who repeatedly make the same poor decisions about learning.

In the beginning, tired teaching comes and goes. We may feel ourselves falling into a rut, but it's usually temporary and we're soon back on track. But later, the tiredness returns. At some point, a kind of paralyzing inertia can settle over us. We no longer have the energy or motivation to change the syllabus, alter course readings, or update the assignments or activities. Add new content? No way, the course is already too full with essential material. Offer online quizzes? Who has time to figure how that works? Besides, the students will cheat.

That's why and how tired teaching happens. The more important question is: What can we do

about it? I think we have to start by recognizing that some form of tired teaching happens to all of us at one time or another during our careers. It's an occupational hazard when you work in environments that prize always being rational and objective. A quiet assumption prevails that it's the intellect that powers teaching. Content carries the day. We deny or diminish the importance of teaching's affective demands. We may be physically tired, but we may also be emotionally drained and running on empty. The two can happen simultaneously, but they aren't the same.

We can start by facing the reality of tired teaching, no longer pretending everything will be OK if we just get to bed earlier. We can follow that acknowledgement with purposeful efforts to take care of our instructional health and wellbeing. As many of us have learned, it's not enough to know we need to eat well and exercise regularly. Both depend on consistent action, and, like poor health, tired teaching is more easily prevented than cured. Let me start a list of ways we can respond to the possibility and reality of tired teaching.

- Purposefully make changes—not always big ones, not always a lot, but always some.
- Regularly infuse teaching with ideas and information (not just techniques) sourced externally.
- Engage in collegial collaboration—positive, constructive talk about teaching and learning with colleagues (occasional complaining permitted).
- Take time for the pause that refreshes: regular reminders to yourself that this is work that matters and that what happens to many students in college changes their lives. You are a central part of students' experiences in higher education.
- Be in the moment—in that time you and students share, be present! Listen, observe, and be alert, alive, and focused on what's occurring in that moment.
- Celebrate successes—even small ones. The question that generated good discussion, those three papers showing significant improvement, that student who finally mastered a specific skill—all are moments to be savored.

This article first appeared in *The Teaching Professor* on March 1, 2017.



Regroup and Refocus: Strategies to Avoid Professor Burnout

By Katie D. Lewis, EdD, and Nicole Hesson, EdD

It's the end of the semester! The shiny back-to-school dust has settled and for the most part, everyone is completing their daily COVID checks, wearing colorful masks, and trying to be more aware of their surroundings. The gears of college seem to be moving forward and learning hasn't fallen off the wheels. But, if you pause and listen to the rumblings, there is a different message being shared.

Professors are burning out. Anxiety levels are at elevated levels, even among those who aren't typically anxious. Planning more than a week out seems a risky undertaking. A disproportionate amount of time is spent searching for the best ways to engage students in Zoom sessions while also engaging in face-to-face sessions. We are forced to balance flexibility and understanding while maintaining high academic standards. We have to seek ways to foster student conversation both virtually and in person. This is difficult amongst the unusually quiet students; even the students who were chatty in previous semesters are more reserved now. We have restructured

our course content to embed digital collaboration and authentic conversations. We've been tasked with checking on the mental health of our students—from seniors who are losing out on practicum experiences and questioning what their post-graduation plans will be to first-year students who are struggling more than normal to adjust to college life to commuters with hectic schedules and nowhere to set-up on campus.

Teaching isn't our only responsibility. All the while, professors are dealing with research and service duties. Our research agendas have

been adjusted to include COVID-related topics because publications have pivoted their focus. Journal articles that were previously accepted pre-COVID have been put on the back burner. In order to keep up with research demands for tenure/promotion, we need to pivot as well. Many of us have had to step up to teach more courses because university budgets are suffering. We join committee meetings via Zoom after a solid day of teaching classes that are larger than they've been in the past. It's not just work that is stressing us



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out. Professors have family responsibilities, which may include taking care of sick loved ones and/or educating young children in some version of hybrid school or homeschooling. Balancing one's schedule is more hectic now than it ever was. It literally feels like there is not enough time in the day. With every text, email, or phone call our stress levels grow exponentially higher.

So, the question is, "Now what?" Educators routinely rise to the occasion, adapting and excelling in high stress situations. One only has to glance back over the last eight months to see the art of teaching at its finest! The success stories are out there—you are one of them! But educators are terrible at taking care of themselves. We put everyone else first. As we move from the fall semester into the winter and spring semesters, we need to focus on our mental health. Below are some recommendations for moving from surviving to thriving:

1. **Collaborate.** Identify a colleague who can be your support system. You need someone who you can complain with (for a brief period of time) and help motivate each other to keep going. We are reinventing the wheel, but you don't have to do it alone. Maybe your colleague has already found a great fix for getting students to be more interactive in a Zoom session. Use your resources!
2. **Practice self-care.** Carve out at least one afternoon where you don't work—not grading, replying to emails, or planning lessons. Try to unplug altogether! Reclaim your weekend.

Spend time with your family (and possibly friends in a quarantine-appropriate way).

3. **Gather feedback.** Ask for feedback from your students. Even a quick poll in class can help you find out what is working and not working for them in this virtual or hyflex environment. They are on the receiving end and could have some good ideas that you hadn't thought of.
4. **Say no.** If you are already spread too thin, don't feel obligated to join every committee or additional activity. Be selective in which things you choose to commit.
5. **Research.** Although it is difficult, maintain your research agenda. Keep collecting data and carving out time to write. COVID will eventually end...but your tenure clock is still counting down. Adjust your goals—but keep fidelity with your vision.
6. **Exercise compassion.** Show students and colleagues a little grace. Remember, we are all in the same boat. We are all overstressed and overwhelmed. You might not have all the information about someone's home life.

It is too early for teacher burnout. However, it is here and it's not going to get any better in the near future. Many of us have depleted our surge capacity in handling the stress around this ongoing pandemic. We have to adapt in this "new normal," and we have to take care of ourselves so that we can prepare our students to be leaders in their field.

This article first appeared in *Faculty Focus* on December 18, 2020



Wellbeing and Well-Thinking: How to Stay Healthy in Academia

By Seena Haines, PharmD, Jenny A. Van Amburgh, PharmD, and Susan M. Stein, DHEd

Resilience is about growing both personally and professionally when we face difficult situations. It is about coming out the other side as a stronger or more prepared person rather than bouncing back to the status quo. We know that our brains are highly adaptive: we can create new patterns of thinking and acting, yet we need to purposefully practice to make those patterns stick. The brain has neuroplasticity and can rewire itself with consistent practice, persistence, and training—even when we face life’s most difficult challenges.

It can help to think of taking care of ourselves as akin to the routine maintenance that supports a car’s longevity, high performance, and efficiency. As regards our mental and physical wellbeing, we sometimes forget to watch for the signs to slow down, to get “into the shop.” In this analogy, we share some guidance toward wellbeing and well-thinking to promote resilience in your “dream car.”

Checking under the hood

Take the opportunity to self-assess and “check under the hood” to gauge your resiliency. In life, you may reach a time in life known as the

fertile void (McDargh, 2014). This is a threshold to something new, a growth opportunity. It can happen after a major event, when you may feel you don’t know what to do next. In this time, hold onto this “space” and listen: Seek support from your pit crew (crew of support and nurturing) to aid you in decision-making and to provide encouragement. Complete a resiliency inventory to self-assess where you are right now, at this point in time. It might benefit you to routinely check your resiliency gauge—just as you perform regular maintenance on your car. Consider investing about 10 minutes to complete an inventory and perhaps sharing it with an accountability partner, coach, or trusted colleague for additional value.

Here are some links to get you started:

- [How Resilient Are You?](#) (A quiz)
- [Your Personal Resiliency Quotient \(RQ\) Assessment](#)

Maintenance plan

In addition to checking your resiliency gauge, it is important to have a maintenance plan for the other components of developing your resiliency wellbeing. Just as a car needs four wheels to

move forward, you will need four skills to grow your resilient life: *adaptability*, *agility*, *laugh-ability*, and *alignment*. These make up the core components of your maintenance plan.

- **Adaptability:** A change in thinking and feeling, reframing what is possible rather than impossible. Knowing what you can control and what is out of our control.
- **Agility:** Your ability to move quickly, which includes your thinking. Creating multiple actions and solutions while avoiding analysis by paralysis—overanalyzing to the point you can't move forward. In your body, action can take the form of physical needs (nutrition, hydration, sleep, and exercise). Remember the importance of sleep hygiene, which is the best step in clearing your mind and unleashing the power of creativity and innovation.
- **Laugh-ability:** Your playtime. Think about “FISH!,” a philosophy created by Luden, Paul, and Christensen (2000) based on their observations at the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle. They encourage people to play, to make others' days, to be present with each individual, to choose their attitudes, and to avoid adopting a persona.
- **Alignment:** To remain standing through your sturdy foundation. Your personal mission statement, your why in life (your core values), your *why* for your career, and your sense of purpose and a higher calling. Alignment can help guide your adaptability.

Ways to fuel your tank

It is important to learn what gives you energy and what drains it. We've all had days when we leave work smiling, energized, and feeling on top of the world; what makes those days so positive? It is possible that we have positive interactions with our colleagues, are able to laugh and laugh

a lot, celebrate someone's success, or feel valued in the work we do. And yet we've also had days when we wish we could hit the reset button—whether because we don't feel valued, there is unnecessary tension or drama, or we are unable to work to our fullest on account of leadership or management actions.

Our energy comes from what psychologists Salvatore Maddie and Suzanne Kobasa call *psychological hardiness* (McDargh, 2014). Their research states that there are three ways you can practice to improve your emotional and physical energy: *commitment* (living your *why*), *control* (knowing what you can manage and change), and *challenge* (being willing to handle what ends up in your work space). Positive and negative emotions can co-occur. Research indicates that individuals who have a daily ratio of three



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positive emotional experiences to one negative emotional experience are likelier than those with lower ratios to be resilient and successfully reintegrate (Fredrickson, 2001).

Apply these concepts and be purposeful as you develop your personal and professional resiliency by identifying your energy boosters and drainers. Identify those activities or situations that fuel your tank, commit to keep them coming, and celebrate them. And when you identify energy drainers, challenge and reframe them. Maybe all you can control is your reaction to them—and that takes training in learning to let them go. Keep practicing these three so you can keep your tank full.

The autobahn—road of life

Ashley Good (n.d.), founder and CEO of Fail Forward, believes that our relationship with failure can either unlock our full potential or keep us from ever realizing it. Have the courage to try and the resilience to fail. While failing may seem

daunting because of how we define ourselves, it doesn't need to be that way. Perspective is key. By embracing failure and setting yourself up to win no matter what, you pave the way for your success.

To summarize, just as a car needs four wheels to move forward, you need four skills to grow your resilient life: adaptability, agility, laugh-ability and alignment. It truly is a combination of all four resiliency skills that will aid you in bouncing back. Adaptability helps you reframe situations and challenges as you work toward solutions. Agility keeps you nimble and helps you avoid potholes. Laugh-ability brings you energy in difficult times. Alignment helps you stay true to yourself—your purpose, your why. All these are relevant on and off road. We wish for you a long, adventurous, and successful journey.

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Why You Should Be a Selfish Instructor

By Shazia A. Ahmed, PhD, and Juliet V. Spencer, PhD


In the early days of the pandemic, we all did what we had to in order to flatten the curve, and that meant quickly switching to online instruction. As the pandemic raged, teachers everywhere were bombarded with information: strategies for moving in-person classes to online platform, tricks to make online classes more engaging, and a plethora of tips on how to support stressed students (Izenberg, 2020; Gewin, 2020; Anderson 2020; Field 2020). Everyone had ideas about how to teach during a public health crisis.

Since the start of the pandemic, faculty have experienced an exponentially increased emotional load. Not only were we charged with delivering engaging online instructions after a crash course in technology, but we also saw students face more stress than ever before while also dealing with other issues, like trying to care for sick family members. Throughout this, we all tried to be flexible and show compassion, which often meant extra work for us in order to help students who were sick or in quarantine keep up with class material

and make up missed assignments and exams. As many universities face budget cuts because of lost revenues and declining enrollments, the only thing that is persistently climbing is faculty workload.

As well-meaning administrators recognized that faculty were feeling isolated and overwhelmed, we received an onslaught of articles, trainings, and webinars on work-life balance and self-care. But, these trainings, webinars, and self-care procedures all took time, a commodity that instructors have precious little of in these uncertain times. As educators, we are deeply invested in

student success and frequently go the extra mile to ensure it. However, this effort can be physically and mentally draining. If you find you are getting snippy in communications with students and your excitement about education is giving way to irritation, then you are probably getting burned out. It is okay to acknowledge it. You are a human being, and you are sensitive to prolonged extreme stress just like anyone else. We wouldn't trust an airplane to a sleep-deprived



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pilot, and we can't expect faculty to operate at their best when they don't have time to rest and recharge. We recommend that it is time to become a selfish instructor! Consider adopting some of the following strategies. Each takes less than 30 minutes to implement but will contribute to decreasing some stress in your life.

1. Use Your Learning Management System (LMS) effectively.

No matter what system you use (Blackboard, Canvas, Google classroom, etc.), you should be able to create an introductory home page for your course. We like to call it "Start Here," which provides an overview of the course, explaining where to find material and when new things will be posted. If you tend to get the same questions a lot, consider repeating policies from your syllabus here to reinforce them. This will help reduce these extra communications with students.

2. Be clear on communication.

Write an email policy in your syllabus defining the times you will be available to answer email. It can be within 24 hours or between 8 am and 6 pm, whatever works best for you. Setting up an automatic reply reinforcing this message will reduce your urge to respond to emails right away, and it will also let students know when to expect an answer.

3. Spell it out in the syllabus and test on it.

Give an open book quiz on the syllabus as a prerequisite to your first course module. We all spend a lot of time ensuring that the course policies are clearly explained in the syllabus, listing assignments and learning outcomes so students know what to expect. Unfortunately, students don't always read it. A few points for a syllabus quiz will go a long way. Making the quiz is a minimal time investment, and even if students only use the "find" function to locate

answers to the syllabus questions, they will still absorb something. Giving a syllabus quiz will not eliminate your "It's in the syllabus" communications, but it will greatly reduce them.

4. Use your calendar wisely.

For activities like grading or making up exams, block off what you think is a reasonable amount of time on your calendar. Stop when time is up! This will prevent burnout and also help you learn to budget a more accurate or realistic amount of time the next day. Don't feel guilty about it. Your time is valuable and using your calendar will help you track and use your time wisely.

5. Give the gift of time.

Consider letting the online assignment or exam be "available" for a few days after the due date (perhaps with a reasonable penalty per day). You can simply change the LMS setting for dates on the assignment or exam. Most students will complete the work on time, but for the ones that don't, keeping the assignment open a little longer will tremendously reduce requests for extensions.

6. Give the gift of time—to yourself.

Schedule breaks for yourself on your calendar. If possible, walk away from work during that break. Physical activity is a great antidote for stress, and a change of scenery will allow your eyes to rest while stimulating your mind. Walking, especially outdoors, has been shown to increase creative output and restore cognitive capacity (Heffernan, 2015; Oppezzo & Schwartz, 2014). If the only escape you can find is in the bathroom, then consider taking longer showers to allow your mind time to wander and process things. Set time limits for evening and weekend work and follow them without guilt.

Be selfish! If getting enough sleep and giving yourself permission to have a life outside of

work makes you a selfish person, then please, be selfish. Go ahead, create mental space and time to care for yourself. Even when we are not teaching through a pandemic, these strategies can help you streamline communications and make the most of your time. A happier, well-rested instructor is a kinder instructor, and kindness is the medicine we all need in these stressful times.

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Three Strategies to Improve Your Health in the New Year

By Brian Udermann, PhD

I've had the pleasure of working with hundreds of higher education administrators and leaders over the past 20 years or so. The health habits of those administrators in many ways mimic those of the general population. Some routinely wake up at 4:30 a.m. and go for a five-mile run, are very conscious of what they eat, and get eight hours of sleep every night. Others attempt to fit some physical activity into their routines, try but don't always succeed at eating healthy foods, and sometimes get as much sleep as they should. And some are completely sedentary, eat far too many fatty and processed foods, and don't prioritize quality sleep.

Most of the articles I write are about online education, as I've served as the director of online education at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse for the past 11 years. However, before that I was a faculty member in a Department of Exercise and Sports Science where I taught a variety of courses related to health and wellness. So, I welcome opportunities to write about health-related topics and encourage people to think about improving their health, whenever I can. Here's my advice to you.

Move a little more

Roughly 80 percent of Americans don't get enough physical activity. People offer a myriad of

excuses why that is the case. I don't have time. I don't like to exercise. I don't like to sweat. It is too hot outside. It is too cold outside. I don't like going outside. My tummy hurts. My shoes are worn out. I don't have the energy. I'm too old. We will always, without much effort, be able to come up with an excuse not to be active.

Instead of telling people how much physical activity they should get every day or every week, I generally encourage people to strive to incorporate some movement and activity into their daily routine. This could include doing yardwork, shoveling snow, walking your dog, playing a sport with your child, going on a leisurely bike ride with your partner or spouse, walking to work, playing a round of golf, hiking at a state park, going to a Zumba class, etc. The options abound!

Find something you really like to do and do it at a time that is convenient for you. Exercise with a friend, child, sibling, coworker, or significant other to help keep you accountable. Add your daily dose of physical activity directly in your calendar and guard that time like it is your most important engagement of the day. Consider incorporating walking meetings into your daily or weekly routine at work. I started utilizing walking meetings about 10 years ago, and I love them!

Improve your zzzzs

Nearly three quarters of people report having trouble falling asleep at least once a month and about 10 percent report difficulties sleeping on a nightly basis. This is a concern—roughly one-third of our life is spent sleeping and that one-third can have a dramatic effect on the other two-thirds of our waking hours.

Most sleep experts recommend we get seven to eight hours of sleep a night, and there are many health benefits to getting adequate sleep. These benefits include: being more productive at work, getting sick less often, improved memory, elevated mood and energy levels, maintaining an optimal weight, improved learning and memory, increased longevity (living longer), ability to cope with stress, improved heart health, and improved athletic ability.

Keep in mind that what works for one person to improve the quality of sleep might not work for another, but many sleep experts agree on the following strategies. Establish a nightly routine before going to bed. If you are a parent, you likely have a nightly bedtime routine for your child; establishing routines can be beneficial for adults as well. Evaluate your sleep environment. Most people sleep better if their sleep environment is cool, dark, quiet, and comfortable. Finally, avoid stimulation before going to bed, whether that be drinking caffeinated beverages, engaging in vigorous exercise, or watching the latest installment of *The Fast and the Furious* movie series.

Eat healthier

While eating healthier is easy to recommend, it is not always easy to implement. Our society consumes too much sugar, sodium, and saturated fat, so attempting to reduce our consumption of these items is a great place to start.

One way to do this is to shift our shopping

habits. When grocery shopping, attempt to purchase more whole foods: foods that look like they did when they were grown and harvested. Remember packaged foods tend to be higher in sugar, sodium, and saturated fat. Another idea would be to limit consumption of fast food. Notice I didn't say completely eliminate fast food, which might be challenging as roughly 25 percent of U.S. adults consume fast food on a daily basis. And I confess, once every week or two I swing into a fast-food restaurant for a burger and fries. Or try to make slightly healthier choices when choosing the fast food option, as there are usually some healthier selections on the menu.

Food preparation can also be a challenge. Most of us have busy schedules—we work a full day and then start chauffeuring children to soccer practice, dance, piano lessons, karate, choir, debate club, 4-H, etc. Often the last thing we think about is what we will be making for dinner.

One strategy working professionals use to ease the load of preparing food is to use crock pots or slow cookers. Add the contents of the meal you are preparing prior to leaving for work in the morning and by the time you arrive home that evening the meal is cooked. Another idea to help decrease prep time is to set aside a few hours on the weekend to prepare three to five meals for the week ahead.

One last thing

I am not going to encourage you to come up with a list of New Year's Resolutions, which in my opinion happens a bit too often this time of year. However, I will encourage you to think about your health and, after doing some reflection, attempt to identify just one area where you might be able to make a positive change. Find something that will result in you moving a bit more, sleeping a bit better, or improving your nutritional habits. Best of luck and have a healthy new year!

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Using Teaching Practices to Support Student Learning and Wellbeing

By Michele C. Everett, PhD

College student mental health is currently receiving a great deal of attention. Over the last few years, the frequency and severity of mental health issues reported on college campuses has dramatically increased. In a recent survey, 64 percent of respondents identified mental health-related issues as a reason for no longer attending college. Students reported stress and anxiety as the top two factors affecting individual student academic performance (American College Health Association, 2017).

Universities are grappling with how to address this serious health concern. What is needed is a comprehensive strategy that calls on all members of the university community to commit to a shared vision—one that supports student learning and wellbeing. This leads to the question I'm interested in exploring: Are there practices that teachers can implement in their courses that support this vision? Although many instructors may feel that it is not their responsibility and that they do not have the training to serve as *de facto* counselors, there are teaching strategies, most not difficult to implement, that can support student learning and wellbeing.

Creating a supportive learning environment

The climate of a course can influence learning experiences and outcomes. Consequently, the instructor should create an environment that is conducive for learning—a space where students feel safe and supported and are encouraged to discuss issues and ask questions.

Adopting a student-centered teaching philosophy is essential for creating an environment that promotes student learning and wellbeing. This means creating experiences for active engagement, whereby student needs, curiosities, and interests guide instruction. The instructor becomes a facilitator, cocreating the learning experience with students, who share the responsibility for learning.

Supportive learning environments foster positive faculty-student and student-student relationships. In teaching first-year students, I have realized how important it is for college students to discover that there are individuals at the school who care about their lives and their futures, teachers who care about their students' academic success and their personal wellbeing.

Faculty can convey this concern in many

ways—by listening, demonstrating mutual respect, and showing empathy. If students perceive that a teacher cares, they are more likely to take that teacher’s advice about campus support resources such as learning centers and counseling services. They may listen more attentively when caring teachers encourage their participation in health and fitness activities, clubs and organizations, and regular visits with their advisor. Faculty can invite support staff to class to introduce themselves and provide students with information about their services. Peer mentors can also contribute to a supportive learning environment. Research provides evidence for the significant role peer mentors can play in helping students deal with the many challenges they may encounter in college.

Employing pedagogies that promote learning and wellbeing

In addition to the learning environment, teaching strategies shape course experiences and learning outcomes. Several instructional methods engage students in the academic learning process while addressing their personal and social needs.

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a great example. It uses students’ culturally diverse backgrounds to enhance the learning experience. Strategies for engaging in CRP focus on encouraging students to share their personal stories and integrating learning within students’ lives outside of school. Providing opportunities for social engagement is another example of how teachers can promote student development and wellbeing. Social interactions between peers can increase learning through the exchange of ideas and foster a sense of community and belonging.

In a study I conducted in my first-year seminar, students identified forming friendships with classmates as the most important factor that contributed to developing their sense of belonging. Students’ sense of belonging can be

encouraged in courses by including community building activities, using assignments that require students to attend campus events with classmates, forming study groups, and working on group and service-learning projects. Students in the study reported that forming friendships with classmates helped them expand their networks of friends, made them feel like they “fit in,” and increased their participation in campus life.

Concluding thoughts

Implementing teaching practices that foster student learning and wellbeing benefit individual students, faculty, and the institution. At the individual level, students’ learning experiences may result in positive relationships with their instructors and peers. These relationships can provide students with a sense of support that reduces anxiety and stress and contributes to their academic success. At the faculty level, embracing a holistic approach to teaching and learning allows instructors to make an important contribution to mental health–related issues and is instrumental in helping students succeed in college and beyond. At the institutional level, by adopting a comprehensive integrated approach and providing the resources necessary to support the initiative, universities can demonstrate a strong commitment to addressing this serious health concern.

Although teaching practice is only one of many factors that influence student wellbeing, courses can serve as important sites for helping students feel connected to each other and to the university community. Effectively addressing this health crisis requires a shift in thinking. It mandates that all members of the university community work together to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes required to be healthy, intellectually and civically engaged citizens.

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Humor, Learning, and Memes

By Michael K. Cundall, Jr., PhD

Among teachers' biggest worries about trying to incorporate humor into their classes are that no one understands their humor, that they might offend someone, and that they're just not funny. As someone with a clear bias in favor of humor notwithstanding, I say balderdash. Incorporating humor into your class can be low-risk and enjoyable and avoid all the above worries. It can also help you to enjoy class time more as well. And the best part is, you'll be able to use a mode of communication that is one of the most-traded forms of social media for anyone who is a millennial or younger: the meme.

The term meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins (1976/2006) to point out a "unit of cultural transmission" (p. 192). Much like a gene that gets transferred from one person to an offspring, a meme was a sort of culturally held idea or text, such as a rhyme or a prayer, that one member of the culture transmitted to another. Memes now are much more viral, and in popular culture usage has come to focus on viral images or texts easily distributed on social media

platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

I use memes in my courses. In fact, here's one I use in the extra credit section on my syllabus (Figure 1).

The Willy Wonka/Gene Wilder meme, which

is fairly popular and long-lived as far as modern day memes go, is taken from a scene in the movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (dir. Mel Stuart, 1971). The written content around the image may change depending on context, but the picture stays the same, and that's what you're tapping into when you use memes. The picture's meaning is assumed by most



Figure 1. Willy Wonka/Gene Wilder extra credit meme

who read it. The text merely contextualizes it: in my case, to my views on extra credit. That's the beauty of memes. That's what you can tap into as a teacher. There is one thing to note about the text to follow. When anyone analyses humor, it often loses its humorous punch. As E. B. White's paraphrased idea of humor analysis wryly notes, "Analyzing humor is a bit like dissecting a frog: You learn how it works but you end up with a dead frog." (For a fascinating look at the evolution

of this quote—itsself almost a meme in humor research—please refer to <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/10/14/frog/>.)

The facial expression and body pose in the Figure 1 meme are meant to show that you're "listening" to the points being made but really don't accept them. The caption indicates the conceptual oddity of students who haven't done a lot of work in the class asking for extra credit. Basically, this picture is a clever little reductio of the argument for extra credit. While I use this meme as a funny way to introduce my stance on extra credit (I don't like it, but I do give a little), this isn't the only way to use memes. You can also use them to introduce or "explain" ideas and concepts. Figures 2 and 3 offer a couple of examples.

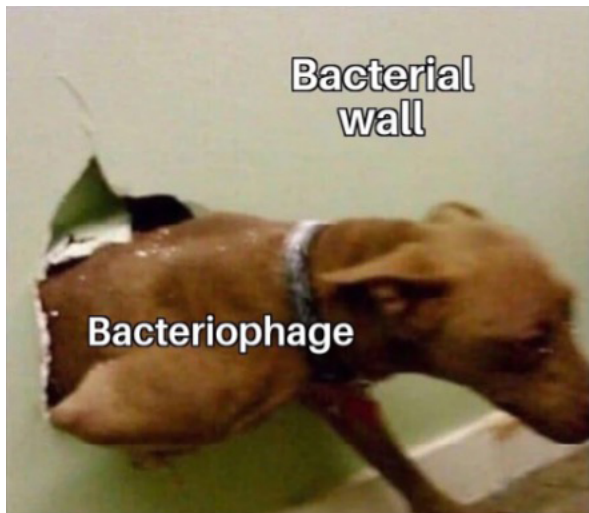


Figure 2. Example of a biology meme (source: https://www.reddit.com/r/biology-memes/comments/co7v97/he_atacc)

I can't give examples from every discipline, but at least you can see that you can use memes in ways to help you get ideas across. As an aside, if you care to share yours with me, please send me some. What should be apparent is that Reddit is a great source of memes. At the end of the article there are additional resources listed to get you



Figure 3. Example of a geology meme (source: https://www.reddit.com/r/geology/comments/chg79c/the_gangs_all_here)

into the world of memes. Be careful, though, because you could wind up doing what many students do and scroll the day away, lost in a world of memes. I probably spent too long just finding the ones for this article. If you take some time and peruse memes, meme sites, and play around with them, I think you'll find some useful memes for your classes.

But don't think that memes need come only from you to your students. Don't be a meme Sage on the Stage. If you're hesitant to inject your own memes, flip the activity around. What could be a better way to engage students than to ask them to delve into an area they're already experts in and then use it? Find a topic that students might struggle with and ask them to create a meme for it. Then have them share their creations. This could work as a discussion board project for online courses as well. Then see which memes get the most likes or people find the funniest. If you're in doubt, ask the students. Save those for later use in other classes. In inviting memes from

your students you've added a "break" moment in class that can help students refocus as well as providing another way to have the students contact and interact with the course material. It allows them to be creative and maybe have a couple of laughs, and it makes them work with course content so they are doing more than simply listening. They all may enjoy getting to see other folks' creations.

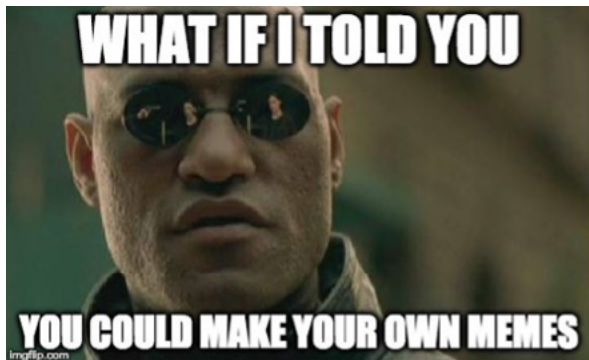


Figure 4. Morpheus/Laurence Fishburne meme from the movie *The Matrix* (dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999)

If you want to be a bit more creative in your use of memes and not simply mine the various sites or use your students, try making your own. Here's one I made for a presentation to faculty on why we should use humor in the classroom. The picture format is *another famous one* that most students will know (Figure 5).

If you're interested in making your own memes, here are a few websites that will help you: [Know Your Meme](#), [Imgflip's Meme Generator](#), and [Cheezburger's Meme Base](#). The process is pretty straightforward. Choose a picture, add some text, and right-click to save. Distribute, then impress your students with your savvy.

So why incorporate memes? There are a number of reasons. Memes rely heavily on humor, and humor is well understood to help us tolerate stress better, improve memorability, and make us more engaged with those around us (Bennett & Lengacher, 2006; Berk et al. 2001;

Gonot-Schoupinsky & Garip, 2018; Mak et al., 2012). If you're worried that humor might not be your thing or that using it could go awry, begin with some memes. You don't need to make the whole class meme-based. Humor functions more effectively when it peppers our lessons and is used to help us through issues, highlight problems, or inject some much-needed levity. You're still in class so avoid making the



Figure 5. Riff on "All the Things" meme

classroom fee more like a comedy club than a place of learning. Find a few memes you deem funny and use them here and there. If you use your students', cite them—and make the citation itself a little humorous (e.g., "J. Smith, Intro to Philosophy, spring 2018"). Modeling the use of citation when using students' memes has the added benefit of showing that you value student work and give credit to your students for their work—all in the best spirit of an academic researcher who is still learning.

One final consideration: when you invite students to laugh and share humor, you not only improve student engagement but also stay reciprocally engaged as a teacher. As teachers we are focused on student success, and rightly so. But we should remember that sharing pleasant experiences with our classes engages us as teachers for the better as well. Students respond to engaged instructors. If you're engaged, if they

see you laughing and playing with content, they will appreciate it. They may not always get the joke, but it is endearing to watch a person enjoy their work. If you use humor and do so well, it is truly a win-win.

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- Helpful meme resources
<https://www.reddit.com/r/chemistrymemes/>
<https://www.reddit.com/r/physicsmemes/>
<https://www.reddit.com/r/nursingmemes/>
<https://www.reddit.com/r/engineeringmemes/>
<https://memebase.cheezburger.com/>
<https://knowyourmeme.com/>
<https://imgflip.com/memegenerator>

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