Intensifying Engagement and Connectedness in Response to Student Pandemic Stress: Three Cases

Abstract

This roundtable session will increase our collective toolkit for supporting student engagement despite the stress of ongoing pandemic conditions. Using three short case studies of interventions made in Fall 2020 courses at a single small private New England university, we will illustrate how students can react positively to small tweaks to course delivery to increase connection and focus. Student reactions to these approaches are provided within a theoretical frame based primarily on principles of engagement. We then separate into breakout rooms, so that workshop attendees may share their own diverse approaches with each other before summarizing those experiences with the whole group. We finish the roundtable with a discussion about lessons learned mid-pandemic that have the potential to strengthen our connectedness with students in our post-pandemic classrooms. That is, we will collectively answer the question, "What will we do differently moving forward? How will we do things better than before?"

Keywords: student stress interventions, stress, COVID, pandemic, well-being, faculty/student connectedness, student engagement, instructional style.

Introduction

Spring semester break scheduled in 2020 marked the beginning of an unanticipated and almost wholesale shift from in-person traditional teaching to online-only instruction as students and instructors were asked to finish out the spring semester remotely. Many in higher education spent summer preparing for a fall that included a mix of in-person, hybrid, and online courses and the need to shift between these modes rapidly just in case the impact of the pandemic turned out worse than expected. Those classes that were taught on ground were reduced, distanced, masked, and interrupted by plexiglass barriers while many other classes remained online or

remote, with a summer's worth of enhancement to cope with the situation the best that we could. Few instructors would adequately forecast the depth that these changes would have on students, nor would those many enhancements anticipate and design out the challenges facing our new realities.

The semester seemed to start strong for many of us. But by the fifth week or so, student behavior and engagement seemed remarkably different in ways not entirely explainable by a shift in course delivery modes. We began to notice in our individual classrooms that students appeared to have difficulties with what had traditionally been the simplest of tasks. Motivating students to read course text and other required readings, which had long been a challenge, became even more difficult. Student understanding and ability to follow even simple instructions seemed taxed. Late or missing assignments increased. And their ability to follow lecture and discussion seemed greatly diminished. Even casual conversation between students, such as before and after class, seemed quite low. We began asking ourselves and then our colleagues what was going on. More than any other factor, student stress and isolation seemed to be the dominant causes. By the sixth week, many of us were making significant and unexpected changes in scheduling, adjusting our expectations, and trying to cope.

Short Case 1: Time Out Experience

The first engagement approach evolved out of the professor's recent entry into therapy to work on his personal goal of building a better life. Professor #1 was working independently on that "build a better life project" for a few months, mostly through reading and experimentation. The readings collided with his own pandemic experience and research specific to coping during the pandemic. Difficulties connecting with past memories, forecasting and planning future goals, experiments with mindfulness, and materials from articles about coping during the pandemic

found their way into Professor #1's first email to students (see Table 1) with mindfulness playing a central role in his Time Out Exercise (see Table 2) for his students. His main goal was to have them stop and interact differently with their environment and perceptions. Student inattention and distractedness was also much increased. The professor was worried that many of his students would take the Time Out opportunity to do something mindless instead of mindful, which motived him to send a follow-up email emphasizing the goals of the exercise (see Table 3).

Short Case 2: The Breakfast Table Experience

The second professor's engagement approach was more about influencing both the atmosphere and nature of class to counter the lack of community that students were experiencing as a result of COVID. This professor's traditional teaching style relied on a blend of humor, personalized communication, and informality to create a distinctly informal class environment. He wanted most to avoid students feeling that going to his now Zoom class was the same as passively watching a television show by themselves. Instead, Professor #2 describes his approach as attempting to create a more shared experience, as if he and his class were sitting down to a shared meal or watching a game together. This became even more important during the pandemic when much of his class experience occurred in a Zoom room where students might feel anonymous and isolated. At the same time, Professor #2's instructional style was very much focused on the specific needs of individual students, much like a coach would be, to extend the sports analogy. One important extension of the less formal, more communal environment was that it allowed the coaching of students who seemed to display a particular sense of isolation or reserved mood. If he detected such a cue, he would reach out to them individually. He also invited anybody who wished to hang out at the end of class to do so, in order to replicate the after-class experience as it would have been in-person. In such cases a content question might

lead to a more personal discussion precisely because he had set up an environment where a decrease in power distance between instructor and student made more personal discussions possible.

Short Case 3: The Community-building Experience

By the Fall semester, many students had had very little physical in-person interaction beyond their own households. In this context, teaching an online graduate night class on leadership felt especially awkward. How could we discuss an inherently relational topic when we were each feeling so disconnected? To address this, Professor #3's course was purposefully structured to generate a community learning approach, using the following sequence of assignments: a) Individual introspection via a personal development paper (see Table 4), b) Sharing of personal development papers, c) Service to peers via peer coaching and assisting with final paper research (see Table 5), finally d) Service to the class via sharing final paper research resources (see Table 6). This last activity was titled our "Community Soup", to reflect the fact that each member of the class was contributing an item meaningful to himself or herself with the spirit of nourishing all the others in the class. Throughout the term, virtual class exercises and online postings were in a format that encouraged sharing of personal experiences relating to the material and responses from peers to the experiences shared. Overall, this sequence of assignments encouraged the development of high-quality connections (Dutton and Heaphy 2003) between students. Key to the development of these connections were the acts of service to peers and to the class as a whole. This approach also resulted in the emergence of compassionate group norms which made attending an online evening class more exciting and enriching.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The three main cases all involve interventions to improve student well-being, primarily concerned with reducing student stress and improving quality of life, but interventions that came about because lowered classroom engagement and declining student performance were significant and obvious. Examples of such interventions include student gratitude journaling combined with deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, and positive self-talk stress reduction techniques (Flinchbaugh, Moore, Chang, & May, 2012). Flinchbaugh and colleagues found their intervention to have a positive impact on class meaningfulness and class engagement, two factors we perceived to be in decline as a result of pandemic stresses. Other recent interventions involved the creation and implementation of a 5-week course on positive emotional training (Hamdani (2021) and mindfulness integration in leadership training (Sanyal & Rigg, 2020) in the reduction of work pressures and stresses.

Our session therefore relates generally to the importance of the topic of stress (Stixrud, 2012) as well as stress related to performance, well-being (Lovelace & Parent, 2012), fear, and decision-making (Ferris, 1998). It also relates to management and business education research surrounding stress management and the use of self-leadership and emotional intelligence (Houghton, Wu, Godwin, Neck & Manz, 2012) and emergent concerns surrounding mental health and psychological well-being (Edwards, Martin & Ashkanasy, 2021). Engagement is also a central concern of our session; past research has explored how engagement may be influenced through the use of real-client projects (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004), specific classroom materials and their impact on emotion (Taylor & Statler, 2014), and positive emotions training (Hamdani, 2021).

Session Description

Most of the time in workshop will be spent discussing student disengagement and stress during the pandemic along with workshop participants' responses to that disengagement and stress, finishing with tangible lessons learned and ways forward that have the potential to advance our practice in our post-pandemic classrooms.

- 15 min – short survey of audience experiences in the design of 2020-2021 courses and audience observations of changing student attitudes and behaviors.

- 15 min – brief descriptions of three short case studies centered on observations and adjustments made by instructors based on their distinctive instructional styles and shifts in their traditional approaches to help students cope mid-pandemic. Ties to the connectedness theoretical frame are included.

- 15 min – workshop attendees separate into multiple breakout rooms to share their own diverse and unique approaches and summarize using Microsoft Forms or rapid survey technology.

- 15 min - discussion of lessons learned mid-pandemic that might improve post-pandemic connectedness and reduce student stress while improving engagement. We will collectively answer the question, "What will we do differently moving forward? How will we do things better than before?"

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Appendix

| **Table 1** |
| **Note to Students About Fatigue** |

Dear Students,
I want to thank you for keeping each other safe during this pandemic crisis and keeping the campus open. I know that the gains are significant, but that it isn't costless. I have not been blind to increasing and abnormal "fatigue" for some in my courses, beyond what is normal for this challenging real-client course. I have spoken with at least a dozen others and they are saying the same. So something is happening here and myself, student leaders, other faculty members, and even President Johnson are working to figure out all that's going on and do what we can.

In the meantime, here are some of the things that may have been bothering you that you may not have been able to articulate:
- Things that were important to you before may seem trivial now.
- Things that made you happy before may not be working.
- You may seem overwhelmed even by relatively "small" things.
- Time online or electronically, in Zoom classrooms or elsewhere, may be taking its toll.
- Whether you're doing something for work or for play, it seems to take longer and require greater effort.
- You not only feel disconnected from others, but also from your past or your future.
- You feel tired.
- The darker days seem to get to you more easily.
- You are homesick and haven't experienced that before.
- You are isolating yourself more than just for COVID purposes.

Coping with current circumstances beyond just COVID is multi-faceted and I'm offering to talk during office hours (see the bottom of my email) or some other time. Counseling at WNE is an option. Some people uncomfortable with the WNE counseling option may be able to get tele-counseling or telehealth appointments newly available through their parent's insurance. I have been doing tele-counseling myself to help cope with all this weirdness.

In the meantime, please do what you can to understand how circumstances may be affecting you and those you care about. Try to put that into words and try to share with others. Many people are doing what they can to help and making things better takes time and tiny steps forward. Let me know what I can do to help.

Professor [Name]

Table 2
Written Instructions
TIME OUT Assignment

Dear Students,
For Monday, I will be available during class time on Zoom for anybody who needs to speak with me. HOWEVER, I have an important 20-minute assignment (during class time or before) to take its place. Here's what you need to do:

- Go somewhere you go frequently, but are too busy to pay close attention to it.
- Sit down or find a place to get comfortable and just observe. Look around, use your senses, breathe in the air, etc.
- Take a few deep breaths to slow yourself and what's happening around you down.
- Pay special attention to those things that you enjoy. Maybe it's the way light shines off a building or a sound.
- Only use your phone, if you brought one, to take photos of your surroundings and things you noticed.
- If you need to write down observations, random thoughts, insights, then use a scrap piece of paper and pen.
- Allow yourself to be disconnected from email, the Internet, phone calls...set everything to silent.
- Be sure to give yourself the full 20 minutes even if it is uncomfortable at first.
- At the end of 20 minutes, if you see somebody else from class, wave hello!
- Take any time remaining from the class period (if you do this during class time, which I recommend) and do something you *don't* have to do.

We will be having class Wednesday. You can share your experience at the beginning of class if you want.

You can also do this over the weekend if there's a place you'd like to experience during non-class time.

Have a great weekend!
Professor [Name]

Table 3
Reinforcement Email for Time Out Exercise

Dear Students,
Please take my alternative ultra-flex class time TIME OUT seriously! It is an extremely serious activity even though I have asked you to spend a high-quality 20 minutes in space you typically pass by and do not notice - or may not notice in the same way. I want you to:

- Take time for yourself.
- Take time experiencing life at a slower pace.
- Observe things differently and capture that mentally, photographically (if you want), and using physical (non-digital notes).

I'm only asking that you take that concentrated and relaxed 20 minutes out of the 80 minutes dedicated to class time. If you want to take more time to relax, look around, take in the sights, and gather up some sort of experience that you find pleasing on our campus environment, then take that extra time.

Obviously, mask, distance, and avoid distractions that take you out of your own mental space.

I will see you all Wednesday, unless you've already done this and are coming to class. I will be there for anybody who wants to talk, ask questions, catch up, or solve some problems.

Have a Great Day!

Professor [Name]

Table 4
Relevant Syllabus Items for Online Graduate Leadership Course

Item	Description
(3) Personal Development Paper	The personal development paper is an opportunity for you to identify which areas of contemporary leadership theory and current leadership challenges are important to you. You will assess your own leadership skills and what areas you would like to develop.
(4) Final Paper	Here you are doing a "deep dive", using external sources, on a key topic you identified previously in your personal development paper as being important to you. What does current scholarship say about this topic? Are there lessons from the business press?

Table 5

Peer Coaching Instructions

Preparation: After forming teams, you will be able to read your teammates' Personal Development Papers. (They are posted below, with access restricted to those within the group.)

1. Be sure to read these prior to your team's discussion. The Peer Coaching session will go most smoothly if you think of a couple of items of feedback to give to each teammate as you read the papers: What is impressive about their self-assessment? What tips or suggestions can you give to aid them on their journey of self-development?
2. Create a few questions you will pose to the group of things you would like the most help on (2 to 4 questions). Here are some ways to generate questions:
   o Questions about topics you found you need to work on from your feedback survey *(e.g., I need to increase my empathy, can you help me with ideas on how to do that?)*
   o Questions about how to handle specific types of situations *(e.g., any tips in preparing for my upcoming performance review?)*
   o Questions about how to manage a work relationship that has been difficult *(e.g., I communicate well with most people, but I have difficulty with a specific coworker...)*

Instructions During Peer Coaching:

Logistics--

- Each person will take a turn being the focus of attention (being coached)
- Each person will be responsible for notetaking and sending notes to another person
- Before starting, everyone should decide:
   1. Who is notetaker for whom? Please make sure that the person you are providing notes FOR is NOT the same person as the one from whom you are RECEIVING notes.
   2. Decide the order of who will go first, second, etc… Also, be clear about the time limitation of the group (so you can divide time equally)

Three Main Coaching Elements--

1. Feedback from the Group
   - What impressed you about their paper?
   - What suggestions do you have about how to proceed?
      - Do you think they should continue to solicit more feedback for personal development?
      - Do you think their aims for the near-term (end of paper) are practical?
      - What can you suggest to help?

- So many possible things you can provide as feedback here….
- Focus on BEING HELPFUL for their accomplishment of their aims/future aspirations…
2. Questions from the Focal Person
    - Focal Person shares their list of questions: what are they looking for specific ideas/help on?
3. Final Paper topic discussion
    - Focal Person shares what they think they might choose as a Final Paper topic
    - Discuss ideas and tips regarding sources to research, ways to make a topic more specific (if necessary), etc

Notetaking – when it is your turn to take notes for a group member

- Feel free to use an outline format
- Please try to record main comments, ideas, and insights voiced by all (yourself, the focal person, and the other group member(s))
- Do ask the others to slow down/pause while talking if needed
- Make sure to also contribute fully to the discussion (not just taking notes)

<u>After the meeting</u>

- Send an email to the recipient (also copying the instructor), with the entirety of your notes
- (Optional) If you think of other elements of feedback, feel free to add to your email
- This counts as your "discussion post" for the week ☺

Table 6
"Community Soup" Instructions
We will conclude our term with a SHARING of materials. In particular, you will share something that you've already been working on for your Final Papers (so your contribution here will be quite easy for you). This is our "Community Soup", or "Stone Soup" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Soup#:~:text=Stone%20Soup%20is%20a%20European,regarding%20the%20value%20of%20sharing.). We each have a wealth of experiences and knowledge that we have been sharing over the course of the term, and also we each have been exploring some new territory via the readings and now your own current research on your topic of choice. So let us all bring one last *offering* to contribute to our Community Soup! **This offering should be a link to a resource you think the others would benefit from or enjoy that you have found during your final paper topic research** -- a link to an article, a video, a blog post, or anything else. If it is something that you have found impactful or inspiring, then chances are we will also be moved! I have posted my offering, which you can see on the Padlet there. Jane Dutton (who you will remember from the materials on High Quality Connections) recently gave a speech on remote meeting / Zoom practices which has helpful things for us all to think about implementing. **Enjoy some SOUP!** At your leisure, go through the offerings we've all provided on our Community Soup Padlet page. I will keep the padlet page up for at least the next several months, so it is something you can choose to return to, or even share with others. To extend the metaphor, I hope our soup is nourishing to you through the dark winter days ahead of us in our continued pandemic isolation. I have so enjoyed working with you this term! With Joy, [Instructor Name].