Teaching with Compassionate Empathy:
Suggestions for UW-Superior Instructors

Instructors at UW-Superior are well-known to care greatly about students and approach their teaching with passion. They— we—are also called upon now to be “first responders” of students’ social and emotional health, and it is assured that this part of all teacher’s jobs, from K-12 to the University, will be amplified this semester. Ours and our students’ lives are disrupted. If you were in the classroom together, you would talk as a class and perhaps one-on-one. You would share the challenge of moving your classes online, missing colleagues, concerns for immunocompromised loved ones, and the challenges of homeschooling kids while juggling job responsibilities. Now, we must consider how to do this emotional labor from afar.

To that end, this suggestions document is offered from the point of view of “compassionate empathy,” and provides some communication suggestions along the lines of:

**Vulnerability, Flexibility, Presence & Warmth, and Self-compassion**

“With this kind of empathy we not only understand a person’s predicament and feel with them, but are spontaneously moved to help, if needed.” --Daniel Goldman

**Vulnerability**
Sharing vulnerability, or your own fears and uncertainties, can be a powerful tool for growing community and showing students understanding and support.

*Suggestion:* In addition to the academic and procedural materials you will share in the first week of online courses, consider creating a “new normal” video or message in which you share some of the details of your situation, how your household has changed, and your nerves about teaching online and expecting something different than you originally asked of your students. A lighter touch might also entail a “tour” of your home workspace – you could even encourage your students to post a photo of theirs as well.

*Suggestion:* Consider creating a discussion board where students post about the impact that COVID-19 has had on their lives. Show students you care by asking how they are doing and by expressing some of your fears and COVID-19-induced predicaments as well. This type of discussion would exist outside of your normal course content, so it would not be required. But, there is some merit to the practice of “emptying” one’s mind of worries and stress in order to focus and improve in learning.

**Flexibility**
Neither you nor your students planned on a semester of online learning during the potential for many people in our region and beyond to become ill or need to take care of an ill relative. It might be comforting for you and your students to be reminded: the overall goal of teaching and learning will not be changing – and that is a good thing. Your learning goals and content most likely can remain intact.

On the hand, consider that other parts of your teaching practice may need more flexibility – especially when students are juggling home responsibilities, homeschooling, and potentially illness. You might not know what
needs changing until a student asks for something unusual – when making your decision about how to accommodate them, let flexibility lead the way.

**Suggestion:** Find the leeway in your schedule & due dates – can you accept late work or extend deadlines based on a mutually agreeable date?

**Suggestion:** Allow for a verbal or recorded reflection or comment that would otherwise come to you in written form. This may lighten the load on a student whose workspace must be packed up at the end of each day.

**Presence & Warmth**
In the classroom, teachers make eye contact, read the room, note body language, and ask students directly how they are doing. On the other hand, online interpersonal communication is mediated and may or may not be synchronous. Luckily, while for the rest of the semester your primary mode of communication with students will be written, you have an advantage in that you have gotten to know these students for eight weeks. In several ways, you can maintain the friendly relationships and personal touches you have already established in your classes.

**Suggestion:** Convey your presence and how your students can access you through several means: email, phone calls, and even a virtual office hour. Be sure to upload a profile photo in your Canvas account. Take it a step further to create “telecommunity” and have an open hour for pop-in chatting.

**Suggestion:** Be clear about how fast you will respond to emails or “Raise Your Hand” Discussion Posts in Canvas during the week and on weekends (if at all). Some best practices indicate a 24-hour widow to “confirm receipt” of a message works well for students – then deliver the fuller response at a point in time decided and communicated clearly by you. You might also consider activating the notification setting to avoid having to login and check the Discussion Board too often.

**Suggestion:** Offer students feedback on their work considering two key elements: timeliness and personal connection. For the former, be clear and consistent in your turn-around time. Stick to your own deadlines or explain why you must extend the time you’ve allotted yourself. For personal connection, write or record your audio comments individually to each student. You might have a script or bank of comments to draw from, but the one-to-one touch will go a long way.

**Self-compassion**
Of course, no one who chooses to teach online starts in the conditions in which we have found ourselves. This is not the ideal timeframe or atmosphere to start an online course – or half of one! You may feel you are not versed-enough in Distance Learning Best Practices or Canvas. You may feel rushed and even resentful. It is likely you will make a mistake or not master a certain aspect of the technology. You may forget to publish Modules or Assignments. You might even miss an email from a student. For all of these things

**Suggestions for Self-Compassion**
- Cut yourself some slack. It is OK to make mistakes.
- Ask for help – from a member of your department, Canvas team, or even your students.
- If you need to, put a pause on something while you figure it out.
- Share vulnerability (again): own your error, explain the resolution, and apologize if needed.
- Be kind to yourself and model self-compassion to your students by involving them in your learning-curve.
- Move on!
Tying it All Together: Your First Canvas Announcement

Set the scene for a successful online experience with a “welcome back” message for your students via email and/or Announcements. In the following model, we’ve tried to convey vulnerability, flexibility, presence & warmth, and self-compassion. Feel free to adapt to your own style and needs:

Welcome Back...
We are all starting a new adventure in this course as a result of COVID-19. I am nervous just like you, but I am also excited at all that we will learn together in this new environment. Many good things can come out of disruption and change, and I will do my best to guide you to the best of my ability. I ask for your patience while I get accustomed to our new routine as well.

First, I want to share with you my expectations for our course now. Some policies and routines have changed...[INSERT YOUR EXPECTATIONS].

Second, here are directions on how you get started in our “new” course: [INSERT THE PLACE TO START FOR THE STUDENTS].

Finally, please reach out to me with your questions and concerns [INSERT CONTACT INFO]

I’m confident that we can work together to make this a great learning experience from here forward. Please let me know how I can best support you as we transition. I’m so grateful to be with you during this time of challenge and opportunity. Thank you for being part of this journey with me.

Resources for Further Consideration


Brene Brown on Vulnerability [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwFN6r7Y_Sg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwFN6r7Y_Sg)

Brene Brown on Empathy [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw)

Where Does Compassion Really Come From? [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4a66aFaIME](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4a66aFaIME)

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