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Are You Being Rigorous or Just Intolerant?

How to promote mental health in the college classroom

By Catherine Savini MAY 04, 2016

I always took pride in being "a hard teacher." I was rigorous but fair; my students

didn't need to be geniuses to succeed, they just needed to be "good students." A good student attends class, sits attentively, participates in discussions, and meet deadlines. But after more than a decade of teaching, I realized that my idea of the good student was standing in the way of good teaching.

My awakening began one day in my required composition course, when three students sat in class wearing ear buds. Trying to stifle my annoyance, I grumbled to myself: "How could they think this was appropriate classroom behavior?" A week later, another student got up and walked out of class in the middle of a writing exercise. One of her peers later told me she had deemed the work "unproductive." Hearing that I felt the familiar heat of anger: "Why come to college if you don't want to learn?"

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I've learned to push past those initial flashes of frustration, thanks to fresh data on the mental health of college students and to recent research on teaching. One concept in particular that has changed my interactions with students is the "ladder of inference," presented in Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*. The ladder of inference reveals the steps we take to create our beliefs about the world. The first five rungs of the ladder are: (1)

observing a person's behavior; (2) selecting data from what we observe; (3) interpreting that data through the lens of previous experience; (4) making assumptions; and (5) drawing conclusions about that person.

We tend to run up that ladder so fast that we unconsciously draw conclusions based on scant data. To make matters worse, once we've drawn our conclusions, we only entertain data that confirm them. If a student is late, we might assume he doesn't respect our time, and every time he is late, our judgment is confirmed. But if we gather more data, we might discover that the latecomer has OCD and struggles to get out of the house. Of course, the student could just be inconsiderate or a slacker, but we don't know unless we seek out more information.

I decided to take the information-seeking route. "So, tell me about the ear buds," I asked one day, and the story of this 18-year-old's struggles emerged: He had been in multiple car accidents; he is on pain medication but has trouble sleeping and staying focused; the background noise of the music helps him to concentrate. People with ADHD confirm this: They need something in the background to crystallize their attention on the foreground.

As for the student who walked out midclass, I invited her to my office where I learned that she had left because of a panic attack. After a short conversation, I was satisfied that she had the necessary mental-health support, but when I asked about her other courses, she told me she was at risk of failing due to excessive absences. "Easy solution," I said. "Communicate with these professors."

But that was not an easy solution. The last time she had divulged to an instructor that she suffered from anxiety, the instructor's response was, "Yes, we all have anxiety." In the student's words, this teacher "shut me down."

According to data from the [2013 National College Health Assessment](#), nearly half of 123,078 respondents from 53 colleges and universities across the country felt overwhelming anxiety over the previous year and a third had problems functioning because of depression.

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like a crucifix to ward off the 'students from hell.'

While some students arrive with diagnoses and legal accommodations, many begin experiencing mental-health problems during college; the average age of onset of depression and anxiety is 18 to 24. Whether these conditions are permanent or temporary, they are usually accompanied by learning challenges, such as impaired memory and decreased ability to focus and make connections, inhibited curiosity, diminished creativity, and limited flexibility.

To be clear, I have known students with psychiatric conditions who perform the role of the good student, but for others, conforming to that script can be impossible at times.

Despite our students' struggles, many of us continue to teach the way we were taught. We continue to lecture and produce syllabi that have the threatening tone of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt not eat in class, thou shalt not be late, thou shalt not use cellphones. These rigid documents reflect good intentions. We want our students to learn how to behave professionally so that they succeed in the "real world."

But there are a few problems with that approach: It doesn't work. Banning cellphones, for example, doesn't stop students from using them. And in the real world, successful people sit in meetings texting and eating food, or are routinely late. When we fill our classrooms with "don't" directives, we are not treating students as adults.

Still, we hold up the syllabus on the first day of class like a crucifix to ward off the "students from hell." In his classic *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, Parker Palmer draws the veil from the "student from hell" to reveal a student "full of fear." According to Palmer, teachers are also driven by fear: "We collaborate with the structures of separation because they promise to protect us against one of the deepest fears at the heart of being human — the fear of having a live encounter with alien 'otherness,' whether the other is a student, a colleague, a subject, or a self-dissenting voice within."

That resonates with me. As a writing instructor I rarely lecture, but I do have a tendency to choreograph every step of class, leaving little space for "live encounters." If, as Palmer suggests, we are protecting ourselves, it makes sense that our syllabi are stringent. It also makes sense that we are more likely to rely on stereotypes of students rather than seek more data about them — because when we gather more information, what we find can be unsettling. They are not whom we envisioned. Rather than

knowledge-thirsty, carefree adolescents, our students are complex people with complicated lives.

It is tempting to say, "We should leave mental health to the experts." I have said that myself. But now I recognize that asking students to leave their mental-health issues at the door is not only unreasonable, it's unjust. It's akin to asking students to leave their race or gender at the door. Of course, we should direct students to the experts when they are in crisis, but there's much we can do without positioning ourselves as therapists or saviors.

The work of promoting mental health shouldn't always be outsourced to the counseling center; it must be part of the fabric of our institutions, including our classrooms. Too often when faculty discuss students with mental-health conditions, the conversation ends in the same place: Either we establish rigorous standards or we coddle students. But that is a false binary.

How then do we uphold our standards while creating an equitable learning environment? We can do so through small but meaningful acts like these:

- Mention in class campus events that promote mental health.
- Bring in speakers from organizations like Active Minds, a nonprofit that seeks to raise mental-health awareness among students.
- Distribute counseling-center information in class, including what to do if a roommate acts depressed.
- Include a statement about mental health on your syllabus. (The University of Alaska [offers sample language here.](#))
- Check in with students who have missed multiple classes.
- Survey students at the beginning of a course to gather information about their learning challenges and concerns about the course. Check in throughout the semester with anonymous exit writing.

Likewise, we can also change the culture of the classroom by rethinking how we teach and how we structure assignments:

- Try scaffolding a major paper assignment. That means having students do the work in phases — write a project proposal and hand in annotated bibliographies before the actual paper. It's a good way to reduce student stress about a major assignment and improve their performance.
- Assign a text about mental health.
- Assign ungraded, in-class writing that asks students to think through problems related to course content and to assess what they do and don't understand.

- Cut back on the time you spend lecturing and integrate more group work into your courses to create community.
- Finally, when students are in crisis, walk them over to the counseling center or dial the phone to make an appointment for them on the spot.

In a [2011 survey](#) conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness, stigma was identified as the No. 1 barrier to students seeking counseling. Discussing mental health in the classroom reduces that stigma and encourages students to provide us with more data.

The student who left in the middle of my class told me she felt comfortable talking about her personal struggles with me because in my class we had read an article about mental health. She is smart and hardworking, but she was at risk of failing due to excessive absences. During our 15-minute conference, I gave her my computer to email her other professors and spell out the problem. She needed a nudge to trust that this was her best shot at succeeding at college.

Admittedly this is harder to do in a large-sized class. But even in such classes, we can acknowledge mental health by being open to "live encounters," by ditching rules that don't enhance learning, by responding to students with flexibility and caring, and by being informed about how mental illness affects learning and behavior.

Outside of the classroom, even something as simple as organizing a panel where faculty and staff members discuss how they manage their psychiatric conditions can be helpful. Such an event had a profound effect on one of my students who had been diagnosed with depression in high school. Hearing the stories of these successful professors and staffers in her first semester, she said, made her think, "I can do this. I'm going to make it."

Reconsidering my notion of "the good student" has improved my pedagogy and my well-being. I spend more time getting to know my students and less time being frustrated. My courses are rigorous, and I have created a space for young adults with complicated lives. In this space, a diversity of perspectives and experiences allows us to learn together and from one another.

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