New Normal Feels Anything But: Practical Strategies for Mental Wellness in the Pandemic Classroom

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The COVID-19 pandemic continues highlighting the need for relationship-rich education, even while presenting challenges related to mental health and isolation for students and faculty. Return to face-to-face instruction has signaled a "new normal" that might feel anything but normal. This discussion draws on James Lang's principles of small teaching, the idea that faculty can make small, manageable changes to teaching that significantly improve student learning and avoid faculty burnout. Specifically, motivation and growth mindset are explored to offer practical tips for promoting mental well-being in the classroom.

A flurry of publications over the last few years have offered repeated directives for self-care, referrals to mental health professionals, and collaboration with community resources to address rising anxiety, depression, and burnout among those in higher education. While these concerns are not new, they have received renewed attention as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated demands placed on those in higher education. For faculty, recommendations for supporting mental and emotional well-being of students have included sample syllabus statements, increased flexibility for meeting course requirements, and identification of red flags signaling a student in need of referral (Coleman, 2022), but there has been less explicit discussion of how faculty can promote their own well-being and that of students using simple classroom strategies.

The World Health Organization describes mental wellness as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community" (WHO, 2022). Mental health is not merely the absence of mental disorders, but part of a continuum experienced individually (WHO, 2022). Unfortunately, while 95% of faculty believe it is their job to connect students to mental health services, most do not feel adequately prepared to recommend mental health support services, approach at-risk students, or recognize students exhibiting psychological

distress (Albright & Schwartz, 2017; Coleman, 2022). This evidence suggests faculty are willing, but not always equipped, to support the mental health needs of students. This problem is compounded by student concerns associated with COVID-19 including mental health, motivation/focus, loneliness/isolation, academics, and missed experiences/opportunities (CCMH, 2021). As a result, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (2021) has called for interventions supporting motivation/focus and social connections on campuses.

There is no replacement for appropriate referral to mental health professionals when indicated (e.g., significant distress, impairment in functioning, risk of self-harm). Yet mental health referral is not the *only* meaningful course of action faculty can take; rather, faculty have weekly opportunities to integrate pedagogical practices supportive of mental wellness. In the following paragraphs, we describe the teaching and learning context that led us to apply small teaching practices in the pandemic classroom and then illustrate how these practices promote student motivation and growth mindset.

Some Semblance of Normal

This article was written by two first year faculty following the 2021-2022 academic year. Several authors published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* during this period offer a snapshot of higher education at the time. At a national level, the combination of the Delta surge, waning vaccination rates, and uncertainty about the legality of mask and vaccine mandates posed challenges for many institutions seeking to return to some semblance of normal in fall 2021 (Pettit, 2021). Moreover, plans for a return to in-person instruction meant more densely populated classrooms with fewer mitigation tools such as social distancing (Ellis, 2021; Pettit, 2021). Several authors illustrated a gap between what university and college employees needed and what campuses provided (Cavanagh, 2021; Ellis, 2021). There were rumblings from faculty and staff about high stress and insufficient pay, whiplash from ever-changing policies and instructional modalities, concern over insufficient protective measures, and loss of experienced employees who were incentivized to retire early (Ellis, 2021; Pettit, 2021). Further concerns surrounded instructional rigor, gaps in student knowledge, and limitless flexibility requiring additional bandwidth from faculty (Mangan, 2021; Coleman, 2022). At this point in time, faculty and staff had been working through the pandemic since spring 2020.

As first year faculty newly freed from graduate programs, we had endured the challenges of finishing dissertations, completing clinical work, teaching remotely

or in hybrid models, and job hunting during a period of time fraught by the murder of George Floyd, election lies, the January 6th insurrection, social isolation, and a public health emergency. Our first semester in our new roles as faculty, fall 2021, was a return to in-person instruction for many faculty and students at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). Transitioning into the new role of faculty was challenging for many of the same reasons faculty before us have already experienced. Layered on top of these challenges was a COVID-19 elephant in the room, omnipresent but not fully addressed or well understood.

We began searching for specific pedagogical tips for teaching during the pandemic– not tips about how to move online or successfully teach a hybrid course, but how to return to the classroom. It seemed it would be not only a missed opportunity, but a disservice to students not to be pedagogically informed by the important lessons of the pandemic: the power of humanizing teachers, the value of relationship-rich education, and the ill effects of long-standing injustice in our society and systems (Schapiro, 2021). As one *Chronicle* author put it, these lessons have the potential to propel us forward as teacher-scholars (Schapiro, 2021). But the answer for how to transition back to in-person instruction was not readily available.

Over winter break, I (Bane) picked up *Small Teaching* by James Lang (2016). For the unfamiliar reader, small teaching is Lang's concept that faculty can make small, manageable changes to teaching that significantly improve student learning. Given the constant cycle of new course preparation we were experiencing, this promise seemed appealing. This article focuses specifically on the aspect of teaching Lang refers to as *inspiration*, which recognizes human beings have emotions and attitudes that intersect with teaching and learning. We re-situate Lang's contribution in the context of return to in-person learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, where it is useful in preserving the mental wellness of faculty and students in a "new normal."

Inspiration Through a Mental Wellness Lens

Motivation

Lang discusses the power of positive emotions (e.g., purposefulness, wonder, excitement, curiosity) to drive motivation. The subsequent paragraphs briefly describe a small teaching strategy (Lang, 2016) for fostering motivation followed by a vignette of how I (Bane) use the strategy in my teaching.

Invoke Self-Transcendent Purpose

By connecting the classroom to students' eventual ability to improve the condition of their fellow human beings, students become aware of self-transcendent purpose and are more motivated to learn. I frequently ask students to complete case studies using the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), a framework that allows students to make connections between a patient's health condition, therapeutic intervention, and changes in the patient's function. The assignment demonstrates to students how they will effectively improve a patient's quality of life.

Share Stories

Stories help us retain information because they tap into emotion. I sometimes worry my repertoire of professional stories pales in comparison to that of more experienced professionals. One solution to this problem is to invite guests into my classroom to share their stories. For example, last spring a guest shared their lived experience growing up with a sibling with a cleft lip. Students were engaged throughout the class and continued to discuss the experience weeks later. As faculty, I was reminded that a story does not have to be mine to appear in class. In circumstances where it is not possible to secure a guest speaker, online professional forums or listservs often offer stories worth borrowing.

Acknowledge Emotions

Faculty can mitigate negative emotions and foster positive emotions to improve motivation for learning. One way I do this is by taking a quick "temperature check" using Qualtrics. I ask four questions, to which students respond anonymously: (1) what is going well for you in this class? (2) what is not going well for you in this class? (3) what can I do to better help you? and (4) what could you do to better help yourself? This survey offers me a pulse on the class and an opportunity to make meaningful changes mid-course. Another way I tap into emotions is by embedding mood scales (e.g., an image asking, "On a scale of Dolly Parton's wigs, how are you feeling today?") in PowerPoints to gauge how students are feeling about a particular concept. A happy byproduct of this practice is usually laughter! See Huss (2022) for ideas on incorporating humor in a course.

A third and final example comes from my experiences walking into a classroom where the nervous energy is palpable. I find that pressing forward with course content reduces participation and attentiveness; taking five minutes to talk with the class about what is on their collective mind helps students set aside whatever

distraction is preventing them from being present. The usual culprit is a major exam or project. In a five-minute conversation with the class, I ask students to share what they have found helpful in preparing, remind them of campus resources at their disposal, offer effective study tips, or share a strategy I use to help deal with stress. I end with a statement acknowledging the students' feelings and asking them to now come with me for the next hour and focus on the class at hand.

Get to Class Early

I make an effort to arrive to class early and speak with each individual student (~30 of them) over the course of several weeks. My goal is to learn names and demonstrate that, despite my title, I am also a person. This practice makes a tremendous difference in students' willingness to participate in class. Because students talk to me one-on-one, they tend to be more forthcoming with questions, more likely to respond to my questions, and more willing to offer insights during discussion.

Demonstrate Compassion

I have a tendency to be so supportive of students who are struggling that it drains my own emotional resources and detracts from what I can offer other students. More importantly, I hesitate to deprive students of practice persisting through learning challenges, a skill I hope is strengthened in college. Lang's (2016) advice:

> Whenever you are tempted to come down hard on a student for any reason whatsoever, take a couple of minutes to speculate on the possibility that something in the background of that student's life has triggered emotions that are interfering with their motivation or their learning [...and] ensure that you are offering a response that will not send that student deeper into a spiral of negative or distracting emotions, thus potentially preventing future learning from happening in your course. [...] Let that awareness hover in your mind as you interact with students who are not performing as you think they should, and *allow it to govern the tone– not necessarily the content– of your response* [emphasis added] to them. (p. 189-191)

I remind myself that students are people, not cognitive machines. While faculty must maintain high expectations, we can work with students to help them figure out how they will meet those expectations.

Growth Mindset

Lang (2016) also draws on Carol Dweck's (2006) concept of growth mindset. Growth mindset refers to the belief that "intelligence is malleable and can improve with hard work and effort," which contrasts with a fixed mindset, the belief that "intelligence is a fixed, stable quantity" (Lang, 2016, p. 199). A fixed mindset leads students to tie poor performance (e.g., a low grade) to low intelligence, but is detrimental to students with low *and high* valuations of their own intelligence (Lang, 2016). A student who believes they are not capable of learning more with effort is less likely to persist through learning challenges for further improvement. Fortunately, mindset can be changed as a result of brief interventions, making it a powerful tool for faculty (Lang, 2016). The subsequent paragraphs name one of Lang's small teaching strategies for promoting growth mindset followed by a vignette of how I (Bane) incorporate the strategy into my teaching.

Design for Growth

Lang recommends structuring courses to reward growth by weighting later assignments more heavily, allowing students to revise work, or setting aside opportunities for students to get feedback on drafts. I incorporate this strategy by scaffolding major assignments or breaking them down into smaller chunks. A research assignment, for example, can be divided into smaller steps (e.g., developing a research question, defining search terms, setting inclusion and exclusion criteria). Students seem less likely to procrastinate, more likely to use campus resources such as library consultation, and less likely to go astray on the assignment. Because I provide smaller amounts of feedback more regularly, students seem more responsive to my feedback and my grading load at the end of the semester is lighter. Furthermore, this practice encourages students to revisit earlier portions of their work, which teaches them the iterative process of inquiry/learning.

Feedback for Growth

Lang (2016) says formative feedback should emphasize (1) effort on the part of the student, (2) the instructor's belief the student is capable of that effort, and (3) the hard work will pay off next time. My feedback to students goes something like this: *I like how you did A, B, and C in your paper. I can tell you worked hard to incorporate concepts D and E from class. Your paper would be further improved by spending time to work on X. If you do this work, it will make a big difference on*

your next Y." This script helps me praise the effort involved in what was done well, identify specific improvements to be made and the effort involved in doing so, and avoid fixed mindset statements like calling the student a "good writer."

Communicate for Growth

A comment I often hear from students: "Anatomy and physiology are just not my strengths." I used to nod sympathetically, unintentionally reinforcing the student's fixed mindset. Now, my response is something like: *It's normal that some things come easier than others, but that only means you need additional time and effort to get it. You're capable of learning this with practice, and I'm here to help. Understanding anatomy and physiology helps us evaluate and appropriately treat patients, so it really is crucial to your ability to help patients.* This script acknowledges the student's concern, expresses confidence that with effort the student can master the concepts, and connects content to the student's eventual ability to help others.

A Plan for Motivating and Growing

Lang (2016) reminds us that emotions, beliefs, and attitudes can interfere with or enhance learning because of a series of physiologic effects on the body and brain that make memories stronger, direct our attention to what matters, connect our experiences to an ultimate goal, and make learning social. These effects can help us (learners) persevere through learning challenges.

Our guess is that many faculty are already using some small teaching strategies whether intentionally or unintentionally. For interested faculty, it may be useful to first reflect on aspects of your teaching that are consistent or inconsistent with small teaching. Since most small teaching strategies require very little preparation, another possibility is to test drive one or two the very next time you teach. My (Bane) next ambition is to consider how these strategies could further my scholarship of teaching and learning. For example, I might survey or interview students to ask which specific aspects of a course are most (and/or least) motivating. Or ask students to what extent they agree or disagree with a variety of statements reflecting fixed and growth mindsets. This information could be used to capture emotions and attitudes in my course and guide simple interventions.

It is easy to convince ourselves that every precious minute of class time should be used to charge through an anxiously prepared lecture. The science of learning tells us that time and energy spent tending to emotions and attitudes in the room

(including the ones we bring ourselves) are well spent (Lang, 2016). While Lang's (2016) small teaching strategies predate the pandemic, they are of renewed utility in this "new normal." Consistent with the concept of small teaching, our "new normal" does not require a reinvention of the pedagogical wheel, only small consistent efforts to foster emotions and attitudes conducive to learning.

Considerations

Most faculty are not mental health professionals. However, faculty can employ simple strategies to design courses supportive of mental wellness. Lang's (2016) small teaching techniques are sensitive to the fact that many faculty, whether in their first year of teaching or their third year of pandemic teaching, have limited bandwidth. Not all effective teaching practices require course overhauls or major changes. We hope that faculty, especially early career faculty, will find this article empowering and be inspired to think about how small teaching strategies can work to support mental wellness in higher education. In this way, faculty can work not only to make their classrooms safe and pleasant spaces but can also help students develop resilience, stress management practices, and lifelong learning skills crucial to their current and future success.

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