



# TA Connections

Newsletter for Teaching Assistants ♦ Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center  
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## Strategies for Teaching in Difficult Times

The recent tragedy at NIU is significant in its impact that many of us may not be able to teach our classes as we usually do. When classes resume, we will have to teach course content as well as help students understand and cope with the tragedy. One way of helping students cope with tragic events is to provide them opportunities to share, engage in dialogs in the classroom, reflect and discuss with one another. Our role as teachers and how we model this process can help students cope with the situation better. Listed below are some tips and strategies compiled from various sources, and these should be applied with adequate consideration to the unique needs of each course section and its enrolled students. NIU's Counseling and Student Development Center (CSDC) and Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC) staff are available for consultations on these steps and strategies for teaching after a crisis in the classroom.

### Take time to talk as a group or class.

Consider providing an opportunity at the beginning of a class period. Often, a short time period is more effective than a whole class period. This serves the purpose of acknowledging that students may be reacting to a recent event, without pressuring students to speak. Introduce the opportunity by briefly acknowledging the tragic event and suggesting that it might be helpful to share personal reactions students may have.

### Have students discuss "facts" first, then shift to emotions.

Often the discussion starts with students asking questions about what actually happened and "debating" some details. People are more comfortable discussing "facts" than feelings, so it's best to allow this exchange for a brief period of time. After facts have been exchanged, you can try to shift the discussion toward sharing personal and emotional reactions.



### Invite students to share emotional, personal responses.

You might lead off by saying something like: "Often it is helpful to share your own emotional responses and hear how others are responding. It doesn't change the reality, but it takes away the sense of loneliness that sometimes accompanies stressful events. I would be grateful for whatever you are willing to share."

### Respect each person dealing with the loss and acknowledge diverse perspectives

Some students will be more vocal or expressive than others with their feelings and thoughts. Everyone is affected differently and reacts differently. Some may view events at least in part from the perspective of their discipline and/or background. Be aware that the presence of someone in our classroom who is evidently from a different background or who has a different relationship to crisis events will alter the dynamics of a classroom. It is important to note that differences (such as religion or nationality) are not always obvious or visible. The challenge is to create a meaningful, educational dialogue without creating an uncomfortable situation for any student. All students must feel that it is truly safe to express themselves, but they must do so with reasonable courtesy and willingness to allow that there are other valuable points of view.

### Be prepared for blaming.

When people are upset, they often look for someone to blame. Essentially, this is a displacement of anger. It is a way of coping. The idea is that if someone did something wrong, future tragedies can be avoided by doing things "right." If the discussion gets "stuck" with blaming, it might be useful to say: "We have been focusing on our sense of anger and blame, and that's not unusual. It might be useful to talk about our fears."

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## **It is normal for people to seek an “explanation” of why the tragedy occurred.**

By understanding, we seek to reassure ourselves that a similar event could be prevented in the future. You might comment that, as intellectual beings, we always seek to understand. It is very challenging to understand “unthinkable” events. By their very natures, tragedies are especially difficult to explain. Uncertainty is particularly distressing, but sometimes is inevitable. You may be better off resisting the temptation to make meaning of the event. That is not one of your responsibilities and would not be helpful.

## **Make contact with those students who appear to be reacting in unhealthy ways.**

Some examples include isolating themselves too much, using alcohol excessively, throwing themselves into academics or busy work in ways not characteristic of them, etc.

## **Find ways of memorializing the loss, if appropriate.**

After the initial shock has worn off, it may be helpful to find a way of honoring and remembering the person in a way that is tangible and meaningful to the group.

## **Make accommodations as needed, for you and for the students.**

Many who are directly affected by the tragedy may need temporary accommodations in their workload, in their living arrangements, in their own self-expectations. It is normal for people not to be able to function at their full capacity when trying to deal with an emotional situation. This is the time to be flexible.

## **Thank students for sharing and remind them of resources on campus.**

In ending the discussion, it is useful to comment that people cope in a variety of ways. If a student would benefit from a one-on-one discussion, you can encourage him/her to make use of campus resources. These include campus religious organizations (<http://www.niu.edu/stuaff/ministries.shtml>), CA's, and Counseling and Student Development Center (<http://www.niu.edu/csdc/>) and International Programs (<http://www.niu.edu/international/>).

## **Give yourself time to reflect.**

Remember that you have feelings, too, and thoughts about what occurred, and these thoughts and feelings should be taken seriously, not only for yourself, but also for the sake of the students with whom you may be trying to work. Some find it helpful to write down or talk out their feelings and thoughts.

## **Come back to the feelings as a group at a later time.**

It is important to acknowledge the adjustments people have made. Just because everything seems to be back to normal does not mean that everyone has finished having feelings about the loss.

## **When in doubt, consult your faculty supervisor or department chair.**

If you think a particular course topic or course activity could result in unintended responses from students or if you need some alternative strategies on planning the course content and activities or handling classroom management situations, consult your faculty supervisor or department chair.

Special Thanks to Virginia Tech's Cook Counseling Center, NIU's Counseling and Student Development Center, Western Kentucky University's Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching, and Vanderbilt University's Center for Teaching.

## **Resources**

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC) at NIU has a number of resources online on teaching after a crisis and they can be found at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/crisis/>

### **Additional Resources on Teaching After Tragedy in the Classroom**

Center for Excellence in Teaching, Virginia Tech. “When classes meet again,” Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from [http://www.ceut.vt.edu/april\\_16.html](http://www.ceut.vt.edu/april_16.html)

Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University. “Teaching in Times of Crisis,” Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching\\_resources/interactions/crisis.htm](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cft/resources/teaching_resources/interactions/crisis.htm)

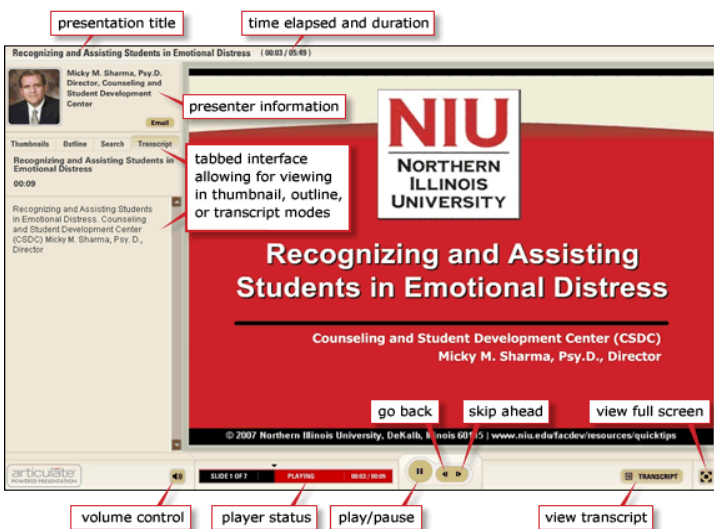
Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching, Western Kentucky University. “Teaching and Learning in a Time of Crisis,” Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from <http://www.wku.edu/teaching/booklets/crisis.html>

Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education. “Responding to Crises,” Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from <http://podnetwork.org/resources/crises.htm>

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC) now has a new online resource called "Quick Tips for Effective Instruction" that faculty, teaching staff and teaching assistants can use to enhance teaching and learning. The purpose of this web-based resource is to offer a quick introduction to a number of teaching and related topics in an engaging format. The Quick Tips presentations can be found at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/quicktips/>.

In one of the Quick Tips, Dr. Micky M. Sharma, Director of the Counseling and Student Development Center, shares recommendations for recognizing and assisting students in emotional distress. FDIDC staff, Jason Rhode and Olga Urban, have recently added Quick Tips presentations on 'Podcasting Principles', and 'What are Clickers?' Each brief (approximately 5 minutes) presentation in the series provides information on a focused topic, which users can view directly online (without the need for any special plug-in, player or client software), download it to their computers to view it later or view it as a Podcast. Low resolution versions of the presentations can also be viewed on *YouTube* at <http://www.youtube.com/niuquicktips>.

The Quick Tips presentations developed in MS PowerPoint have been integrated with voice narration, transcript, video and live hyperlinks, wherever appropriate, using the software, "Articulate Presenter." One of the significant advantages of this approach instead of PowerPoint presentations with audio is that Articulate Presenter compresses the presentation considerably by converting it to Macromedia Flash format, which greatly reduces file size as well as facilitates viewing the presentation online. The adjacent figure shows an image of a screen captured from a Quick Tip presentation.



Several faculty members at NIU have recently begun using *Articulate Presenter* to enhance web-based instruction with presentations that range from brief tutorials to full lectures. Another software called, *Articulate Engage* allows the creation of tutorials with up to ten different types of interactions including a timeline, glossary, frequently asked questions, and a video tour.

Teaching Assistants can make use of these Quick Tips available from Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center in their teaching and look for more in the future on other teaching topics.

## Plagiarism Prevention Using Blackboard SafeAssign

*SafeAssign* is a new plagiarism prevention tool now available to all NIU faculty/staff and TAs to protect the originality of work and ensure a fair playing ground for all students. *SafeAssign* is integrated with Blackboard and prevents plagiarism by detecting unoriginal content in students' papers. *SafeAssign* can also further deter plagiarism by creating opportunities to educate students on proper attribution and citations while properly leveraging the wealth of information at their disposal.

TAs who choose to take advantage of this new Blackboard tool can now deploy *SafeAssignments* in their Blackboard courses that allow for students to electronically submit their written work. Assignments are automatically checked against the following database sources for plagiarized or incorrectly cited content:

- **Internet:** comprehensive index of documents available for public access on the Internet
- **ProQuest ABI/Inform database** with over 1,100 publication titles and about 2.6 million articles from '90s to present time, updated weekly (exclusive access)
- **Institutional document archives** containing all papers submitted to SafeAssign by users in their respective institutions
- **Global Reference Database** containing papers that were volunteered by students from Blackboard client institutions to help prevent cross-institutional plagiarism.

An originality report is then automatically generated for each assignment and provided for the TA and student to review. Submitted student work is added to the NIU institutional document archive in which future submitted work is checked against, protecting the originality of students' work. Visit [www.blackboard.niu.edu/blackboard/resources/safeassign.shtml](http://www.blackboard.niu.edu/blackboard/resources/safeassign.shtml) for more details about SafeAssign.

## Call for Nominations for 2008

**Purpose:** The purpose of these awards is to acknowledge and recognize outstanding graduate teaching assistants for their contributions to the teaching mission of Northern Illinois University.

**Awards:** Three awards will be presented and each recipient of the award will be presented with a plaque and recognized at a reception held at the end of the spring semester. At least one of the awards will be presented to an outstanding teaching assistant pursuing a master's degree.

**Eligibility:** To be eligible for this award, each candidate must:

1. be enrolled as a graduate student in good standing at NIU during the semester the award nominations are due,
2. have been employed as a graduate teaching assistant for one or more semesters, excluding the semester of nomination, during the past 2 years at NIU,
3. have been responsible for teaching a course fully or teaching-related support (example: leading discussions, grading, tutoring, recitation, laboratory development/supervision, etc.) which involved student contact as part of the graduate teaching assistant employment,
4. have contributed above and beyond the general expectations of the position, and
5. have not previously received this award at NIU.

**Nominations:** Each academic or academic support unit that employs graduate TAs for teaching and related activities is invited to nominate two (2) outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistants, one at the master's level and the other at the doctoral level, from its department for the awards. Nominations must include supporting documents to be considered for the awards. The nominations can be submitted by the head of the unit or designee, and each nomination should include five hardcopies of the following:

1. Nominee information - name, degree and major, phone, and email address, department where graduate teaching assistantship was/is held, semesters and years employed as a GTA in that department, course(s) responsible for as a GTA, and description of responsibilities handled (primary responsibilities for teaching, or tutoring, grading, recitation, lab development/supervision, etc.).
2. Nominator information - name, title, department, phone, email address, how long have known the nominee, and in what capacity related to the nominee's GTA responsibilities.
3. Reasons for nomination – explain the nominee's contributions above and beyond the general expectations of the position, impact on the course(s) handled by the nominee and the students, and the efforts made by the nominee to improve teaching by participating in TA development programs.
4. Supporting documents – evidence of outstanding teaching or teaching-related support, such as student evaluations, classroom observations/performance reviews by supervisors, letters of support by supervisors, department/college/external recognition, unsolicited feedback from students, etc.

**Selection of Recipients:** A subcommittee of the Faculty Development Advisory Committee will review the nominations and select the recipients of the award. The committee may request additional information or clarifications from the nominees or nominators.

**Nomination Submission:** Five copies of each nomination should be submitted to "Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant Award Committee, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, 319 Adams Hall, Northern Illinois University" by Friday, March 14, 2008.

Teaching Assistants are encouraged to contact their faculty supervisors and/or department chairs to find out more about the nomination process in their departments. The nomination guidelines and the past recipients of the award can be found at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/ta/outstandingta.shtml>. The awards will be presented at the Graduate Student Recognition reception tentatively scheduled for April 17, 2008.

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