



TEACHING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN CENTER
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[HTTP://WWW.NIU.EDU/FACDEV/RESOURCES/CRISIS](http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/crisis)

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 dialogues 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 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 tragedy 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 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 the classroom. We must be aware 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 their thoughts, but they must do so with reasonable courtesy and willingness to allow that there are other valuable points of view.

Allow freedom of participation.

If students feel uncomfortable during class discussion, allow them to leave. If they feel coerced into the conversation, then they are likely to withdraw from the conversation or guard closely what they say.

Acknowledge both verbal and non-verbal communication.

In a discussion or conversation, silence can make faculty feel uncomfortable, but silence and other non-verbal behaviors can be just as vital to a productive conversation as words are. It is tempting to fill silence with variations on the question asked, but doing so can inhibit students' abilities to think through the issue and to prepare to share their thoughts with their classmates. If students repeatedly need extremely long silences, however, faculty should invite conversation as to why students do not feel comfortable sharing with their classmates.

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."

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. It is better to resist 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.

Ask a professional counselor to come and talk to your students.

Students may experience such feelings as shock, sadness, anxiety, and suffering which may be better addressed by a trained counselor. Trained professionals can accurately interpret student responses and actions, collaborate with you to identify student concerns and needs, implement referrals, and establish a follow-up course of action. In addition, the counselor can assist you to develop strategies to successfully navigate through the remainder of the academic year.

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. Adapt your syllabus for the week following the crisis to accommodate reduced workload. Modify expectations to meet current conditions and provide additional time and support for student learning.

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 or her to make use of campus resources.

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.

Take care of yourself.

Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with stress. Eating well, resting, and exercising help us handle stressful situations more effectively and deal with students and their needs.

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 department chair.

If you think a particular course topic or course activity could result in unintended responses from students, please consult your department chair on planning alternatives.

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.

CAMPUS RESOURCES FOR FACULTY, TEACHING ASSISTANTS, AND STUDENTS

Counseling and Student Development Center can help students resolve personal difficulties and acquire the attitudes, abilities, and knowledge that will enable them to take full advantage of their college experience and be successful. Information about the Center can be found at <http://www.niu.edu/csdc/> and 815-753-1206.

Employee Wellness and Assistance Office serves to enhance the well being of all NIU faculty, staff, retirees and their families. Information about the office can be found at http://www.hr.niu.edu/departments/employee_wellness/ and 815-753-9191.

Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center (FDIDC) has a number of resources online on teaching after a crisis. Information about these resources can be found at <http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/crisis/>. FDIDC staff are also available for consultations on strategies for teaching after a crisis and they can be reached at 815-753-0595, facdev@niu.edu (for faculty), and tadev@niu.edu (for TAs).

International Student and Faculty Office (ISFO) advises international students and faculty on ways to succeed academically, socially, and culturally at Northern Illinois University. Information about ISFO can be found at <http://www.niu.edu/isfo/aboutus/index.shtml> and 815-753-1346.

Psychological Services Center provides high quality mental health resources to students, prepares graduate students in professional practice, and provides opportunities for research on empirically supported treatment outcomes. Information about the Center can be found at http://www.niu.edu/psyc/psc/psc_index.shtml and 815-753-0591.

WEB AND PRINT RESOURCES ON TEACHING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, Virginia Tech. "Sustaining Academic Community in the Aftermath of Tragedy," by Terry M. Wildman, Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/fulltext/117899597/PDFSTART>.

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Center for Learning and Teaching Excellence, Arizona State University. "Managing Your Distress in the Aftermath of the Northern Illinois University Shootings," Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from http://clte.asu.edu/resources/tragedy_student.pdf.

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Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Iowa. "Teaching After Tragedy Resources," Retrieved on February 15, 2008 from <http://www.centeach.uiowa.edu/teachingaftertragedy.shtml>.

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>.

"In the Eye of the Storm: Students' Perceptions of Helpful Faculty Actions Following a Collective Tragedy" by Therese A. Huston & Michele DiPietro, *To Improve the Academy*, Volume 25, D. Robertson & L. Nielson (Eds.), Bolton, MA, Anker.

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

"The Day After: Faculty Behavior in Post-September 11, 2001, Classes" by Michele DiPietro, *To Improve the Academy*, Volume 21, C. Wehlung & S. Chadwick-Blossey (Eds.), Bolton, MA: Anker.