

Teaching During Turbulent Times

Brief Description

Ten adaptive strategies instructors can use to respond quickly and empathetically to support students' learning and well-being during turbulent times.

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Introduction

The ongoing contexts in which instructors are teaching, and students are learning can be quite stressful and, in some cases, traumatic. Classroom environments and campuses have felt the impacts of a global pandemic, racial and economic inequality, political divisiveness, hate crimes, violence, and wars alongside rising levels of anxiety and other mental health concerns. Worry and fear about the future can influence how students show up in classrooms and their ability to focus on learning—even in those courses where the content might seem removed from broader circumstances.

When faced with crises, how can educators respond with agility and compassion, while also being attentive to their own professional and personal well-being?

Instructors may feel uncertain about how to address current events or question whether it is

appropriate to bring up sensitive or difficult topics in their classrooms. They may ask themselves, “Is this relevant?” or “Do I have the necessary facilitation skills?” or “What if I make things worse?” While these are valid concerns, there are useful resources that can inform instructors’ efforts to respectfully acknowledge distressing incidents and ongoing turmoil that can disrupt students’ learning and overall wellness. Providing students with support as they pursue their educational goals, particularly during turbulent times, is core to Northwestern University’s [mission and values](#).

Strategies to Consider

Drawing from the scholarship of teaching and learning literature, which delves far deeper into the pedagogical complexities, this guide synthesizes a variety of strategies for instructors to consider using *in-the-moment* to demonstrate support, fortify student resilience, and foster feelings of belonging.

1. Acknowledge the learning context and affirm community.

Research has indicated that students prefer that instructors acknowledge when a tragic or traumatic event has occurred (or is continuing to unfold), rather than remain silent (Huston & DiPietro, 2007; Linsenmeyer & Lucas, 2017; McGowan et al., 2021).

Acknowledgment may take the form of recognizing the circumstances at the beginning of a class session, holding space for a collective moment of silence, and planning a transition back to the regular content. Gestures like these can bolster our sense of community and shared humanity, affirming that we value one another as people.

2. Communicate care.

Communicating a message of care is valuable. An initial aspect of this message might include sharing how instructors are handling the current situation (if they are comfortable disclosing such information), establishing or re-establishing meaningful connections, and asking directly, “How can I help you learn during these difficult times?” (Imad, 2022). Such a question demonstrates an instructor’s willingness to consider any accommodation that might be necessary. Students can also be encouraged to check in with each other if they feel comfortable doing so. As Eyler explains, “Caring pedagogies do not require us to lower standards or to cross boundaries. They simply require that we be present for our students as fellow human beings and that we invest ourselves in helping them to succeed” (2018, 148).

3. Offer resources and options.

Instructors can also play a vital role in directing students to campus resources available to support them (listed at the end). Concentrating on academics can be challenging in the midst of crisis and communicating this to students can feel supportive, especially when combined with encouragement to open a dialogue

about individual or group needs. Depending on the circumstances and how taxing it is on the cognitive load, some instructors may wish to add a review session or build some additional options into assignments (see also the Searle Center's Guide on [Reflection on Flexibility in Course Attendance Policies](#)). Seeking students' input about adaptations is a way of sharing the decision-making power. This follows in the spirit of bell hooks (2004) who calls on us in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* to "make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership."

4. Be mindful of your own well-being.

Instructors should also continually self-assess: "Am I okay?" It is important for instructors to acknowledge and process their own thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations before attempting to engage in or facilitate a constructive conversation with students. A useful grounding technique is to do a quick scan: notice the surrounding environment, focus on the sensations, textures, and temperatures, and picture each muscle group one at a time and focus on relaxing that portion of the body (APA, 2024). Northwestern's [Faculty Wellness Program](#) offers free consultations to identify appropriate resources to address both professional and personal concerns.

5. Reflect on your own capacity.

It is important for instructors to also carefully consider whether they have sufficient knowledge about the event or issue and/or the facilitative skills and experience needed to guide a productive conversation with their students. As Love, Gaynor, & Blessett (2016) note, instructors must reflect critically on their intersectional identities, experiences, and biases; be familiar with student demographics and student and campus culture; and consider what they will do (and how they will feel) if students have strong reactions, [Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#) (2008), offers activities to help instructors examine their potential readiness as well as comfort level with different approaches.

6. Frame conversations carefully.

Be transparent with students about the conversation's purpose and how it maps onto course learning outcomes or values. For example, instructors may want students to become more self-aware, to engage in perspective-taking, or to connect the subject matter of the class to broader contexts. Revisit any community norms around classroom participation or group engagement that have already been established or use this as an opportunity to co-create some "ground rules" together to promote constructive and reflective conversation. Arao & Clemen (2013) provide concrete suggestions for "transforming a conversation that can otherwise be treated merely as setting tone and parameters or an obligation to meet...into an integral and

important component” of the learning experience. Students should play a role in defining “safety,” and instructors should prioritize ensuring it (Harper & Neubauer, 2020). Proactively establishing community norms or discussion guidelines can equip both instructors and students to respond to turbulent events more meaningfully and collectively when they arise.

7. Recognize that students are diverse in their identities, opinions, and experiences.

Do not assume that all students are affected the same way or that there is widespread agreement. Students’ experiences of any given event can be shaped by their identities, backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, skills, and experiences; and as such, what is traumatic for one individual may not be experienced similarly by another. When inviting and valuing diverse perspectives, it is important that no student feels pressured to speak for an entire group (Hubain et al., 2016; Park & Bahia, 2022).

8. Facilitate productive conversations.

There are several strategies that may help students express themselves in productive alignment with course learning objectives. For example, asking students to spend a few minutes writing out their thoughts associated with a sensitive issue or traumatic event prior to the conversation. Depending on the context, it may be helpful to depersonalize the issue by asking “Why are *some people* upset or angry about this?” rather than “Why are *you* upset or angry?” However, there are also good reasons in terms of perspective-sharing and building empathy to invite the personal lived perspectives of individual students.

9. (Re)establish community norms.

There may be moments when there are exchanges, dialogue, or questions that an instructor does not anticipate or cannot predict which cause distress or discomfort in the classroom. Instructors may “freeze” or “flee” in such moments and attempt to move on quickly without addressing the issue, or “fight” by immediately responding to students in ways that negate their comments or shut down further discussion. Such silence or silencing can be hurtful to students and diminish their sense of trust and community. It is important for instructors to feel comfortable and confident by taking time to reflect on an issue before addressing it in an activated/triggered/dysregulated state. This could be an ideal moment to revisit community norms or discussion guidelines.

10. Empower students.

Individuals and their communities have knowledge, skills, abilities, relationships, and other assets that promote thriving during adversity (Harper and Neubauer, 2020;

Yosso, 2005). Empower students by recognizing these strengths and supporting practices related to their resilience. Ladson-Billings (1995) suggests that developing opportunities that connect students' perspectives to current events enables them to "develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In doing so, instructors bring concepts and ideas from source materials into real world contexts and relate them to the experiences of students' day-to-day lives, which gives them a chance to engage as connected members of a larger social collective.

You can also empower students by activating their "future self", or future identities, to support student motivation and success (Destin, Silverman, and Braslow, 2022). One way this can be done is by asking them to describe, in detail, the positive future that they will reach after graduation and the negative future that they could have avoided. Then, ask the students to write a brief letter to their current self from the perspective of their future self describing strategies that they used to reach their future. As Featured Speaker for the [Northwestern University Practicum](#) on the Science of How Students Learn (2026), Mesmin Destin asked, "Are there moments in your course that already lead them to think about success in the future?". The future self can be activated or heightened during this time.

Conclusion

Our work as educators is more challenging and more important than ever. Proactively developing a community of care within the classroom aligns with Northwestern's priorities of building resilient students and fostering a sense of belonging. Instructors who are familiar with campus resources, who reflect their own positionality and capacity to engage in deeper conversations on current events, and who recognize the diverse range of experiences present in our classrooms will be better equipped to provide support to and facilitate ongoing learning with students during turbulent times. As Kevin Gannon's observes, "Teaching is a radical act of hope. It is an assertion of faith in a better future in an increasingly uncertain and fraught present. It is a commitment to that future even if we can't clearly discern its shape."

Campus Resources

[Counseling & Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#): Counseling and Psychological Services offers mental health services for Northwestern undergraduate and graduate students on the Evanston campus.

[Employee Assistance Program](#): Available to faculty, staff, and household members and provides 24/7/365 free and confidential access to a variety of mental health and well-being services and resources.

[NUhelp](#): A guide to Northwestern's resources and information on safety and well-being.

[Religious & Spiritual Life](#): The University Chaplains are available to talk confidentially with anyone who would benefit from a listening ear. One does not need to belong to a religious tradition to speak with a Chaplain.

[TimelyCare](#): Available to all students as a 24/7 resource to free virtual mental health support, including scheduled counseling and on-demand access to a mental health practitioner.

[Student Assistance and Support Services](#): Supports students by helping them to navigate complex challenges and remove barriers that impede their ability to thrive at Northwestern.

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We are here for you. As you engage in ongoing reflection about ways to enhance teaching and deepen student learning, The Searle Center offers thought partnership and support. Check our [calendar of events](#) or [schedule a consultation](#).