Pedagogical Failures: Reshaping Policies and Practices for Positive Student Well-Being

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Pedagogical Failures: Reshaping Policies and Practices
For Positive Student Well-Being

College should be a time of carefree exploration and self-discovery. Sadly, however, many college students today experience a host of mental health challenges. Between 2020 and 2021, more than 60% of college students who participated in a survey across 373 campuses reported symptoms associated with one or more mental health issues, a percentage that almost doubled from 2013 (Lipson et al., 2022).

As a community college communication instructor, I witnessed this decline in student mental health, especially after the outbreak of COVID-19. Students’ personal narratives of anxiety, depression, and loneliness intensified. Stepping back to analyze my approach to teaching, I realized my traditional pedagogical practices failed to acknowledge and meet the changing needs of my students. Classroom policies were punitive and failed to provide flexibility, perhaps contributing to student mental health challenges; instructor-focused instruction failed to provide opportunity for collaboration and relationship building. To create a culture of inclusivity and well-being in the classroom, I crafted a new pedagogical approach, including policies and course instruction that aligned with feminist pedagogy and promoted positive student well-being.

Shared Power in Classroom Policies

Begin the semester with strict policies and ease up as it progresses. This “advice” was given to me throughout my early teaching career. As a result, my classroom policies over the years remained inflexible and oppressive and failed to establish support for students with varying circumstances. With my new epiphany of a feminist approach to teaching, I critically analyzed my syllabus, looking for written course policies that reflected traditional power structures rather than aligning with the shared power of feminist pedagogy. Two such policies shone brightly: the assignment deadline and attendance policies. Today, these policies promote student empowerment, a concept of feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1997) and offer flexibility to nurture student well-being.

For written homework, I continue to assign reasonable deadlines to maintain structure and prevent last minute end-of-the-semester chaos. However, I also provide grace for late assignments, acknowledging that students, like everyone else, encounter unexpected situations, such as physical illness, childcare issues, and mental health struggles. Additionally, the written policy allows students to submit two assignments late any time throughout the semester; no questions asked. This policy gives students agency to develop decision making
skills, an empowerment strategy in feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1997), as students can choose which assignments to delay.

Regarding attendance, I do maintain a policy because student attendance in the communication classroom is essential for building community and fostering student collaboration. However, I have rewritten the policy to shift the power from the instructor (penalty) to the student (opportunity). My former policy read, “More than four absences result in failure of the class” whereas my new policy communicates how student attendance helps achieve my goals for an inclusive, supportive community. Like with extended homework deadlines, I provide some flexibility with missed classes. No student should fail a class because unexpected situations arise. Also, for each absence, all students can exercise choice by attending a relevant lecture or event on campus or in the community to make up missed days.

**Inclusive Culture and Community through Interactive Class Activities**

In class instruction, traditional power structures privilege the instructor’s voice and point of view and often fail to provide opportunity for student growth. Therefore, in my new class design, I replaced extensive PowerPoint presentations that once dominated instruction with interactive classroom activities that reflect feminist pedagogy principles of community (Shrewsbury, 1997) and respect for the diversity of personal experiences (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). When integrated into the curricula, these activities help build community, cultivate collaboration, and provide students with a platform to share their individual lived experiences, all of which help to bolster their mental health. Below, I briefly discuss two of the many activities I use each semester.

The goal of the first activity is to establish an inclusive classroom culture and community. On the first day of classes, I work with students to co-create a guideline of classroom ethics for the syllabus, one that explicitly states the groups’ commitment to creating a respectful and safe learning environment (Faulkner et al., 2021). Collaborating in small groups, students generate a list of classroom rules to ensure respect of diverse experiences and voices during class activities and discussions. In this activity, students not only share power with the instructor, but they also begin to acknowledge and honor individual differences rather than fear them, a goal of feminist pedagogy (Shrewsbury, 1997).

The second activity, practice in gratitude, is designed to foster community and provide students with a tool to promote positive well-being. Research shows that our brains are designed to prefer and collect negative experiences over positive experiences, which tilt the brain toward the negative, creating a neurological imbalance. When more focus is placed on positive experiences like practicing gratitude, the brain becomes more balanced, tilting toward the positive
(Hanson & Mendius, 2009). In short, practice in gratitude leads to greater levels of positive affect, optimism, and overall well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2023).

To begin the activity, I ask students to free write about areas of their lives that are good, enjoyable, or beneficial; their ideas can be large, like family and health, or small, like a favorite, cozy blanket. I, too, participate by modeling the activity and sharing my own areas of gratitude. This instructor self-disclosure demonstrates inclusivity and (hopefully) makes students feel less vulnerable about sharing. Once students complete the free write, they share five areas of personal gratitude in small groups. This student self-disclosure builds trust and community in the classroom and validates respect and diversity of personal experience. When personal experience is validated, students see “how their lives serve as valid sources of information in knowledge creation” (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997, p. 186). At the close of the activity, students reflect on the experience. What emotions did they feel after the free write? What did they learn about their classmates? Can they identify common threads between their personal experiences and the personal experiences of their classmates? Finally, what benefits did they gain from sharing with others?

In Closing

As educators we cannot control the external circumstances that contribute to our students’ poor mental health. However, we can choose to reshape the traditional approaches to teaching that fail to acknowledge and reflect the current mental health conditions of our students. By weaving feminist pedagogy principles and practices into our teaching, we can guide and influence the positive outcomes of our learning environments, creating safe places for student well-being.

References


