

## **Caring for the emotions of learners: Teaching practices to support student learning during and following the transition to alternative delivery**

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### **Introduction**

When the University of New Brunswick (Canada) announced the switch to alternative delivery methods (ADM) because of Covid-19 precautions, I began my 'to do' list. As I jotted down various tasks like "learn how to use MS Teams" and problems to solve such as "figure out best way to move discussion assignment online," I was unclear how I wanted to approach the transition. Off to the side of my to do list, I wrote "key factors to consider". What was going to shape my decisions moving forward into ADM? After reviewing the relatively long list of tasks and problems to solve, three words came to mind – access, equity, and emotion.

First, I wanted my students to be able to access content regardless of their Internet quality, living situation, or time zone. Second, I had discussion-based assignments that were spread throughout the term. About 65% of my students had completed these in person in groups of five or six with me or a TA as the facilitator. The others would be completing them in an alternative manner. I wanted to be fair both with the options I provided students to participate and how their work would be assessed. Finally, I had heard from some of my students within hours of the university's announcement of the move to ADM. A few students expressed being anxious about how the remainder of the term would unfold and their ability to participate fully as learners. I expected others likely had similar anxieties, but also recognized that perhaps students were feeling a lot of other emotions. Other students expressed being anxious about Covid-19 as it related to their lives – worried they would get the virus; worried other family members would get it; worried about what the shutdown of the economy might mean for their parents' jobs and their own summer jobs.

While access, equity, and emotion all became key considerations while transitioning my first-year core course with 55 students from in-person to alternative delivery, this paper focuses on the dimension of emotion. To begin, I contextualize why emotion was a factor I considered when preparing for ADM. Next, I outline the ways in which Joshua Eyer's (2019) *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories of How Students Learn* heightened awareness of the relationship between emotion and cognition and influenced decisions I made for completing the term with ADM. Finally, I discuss four practices I used to apply that knowledge about emotion and cognition to support student learning.

### **Context: Why Considering Emotion Became a Factor in the Transition**

One of the first emails I received from a student after the announcement we were moving to ADM read, "I'm going to get to experience my personal life without my leisure, recreation and

sport for real. There go my coping strategies and my identity”. The student was making reference to the first assignment I had given to my first year “Concepts in Leisure Recreation and Sport” course which asks them to consider what their personal, family, and community life would be like without leisure, recreation, or sport (LRS). The assignment is designed to help students appreciate the importance of the recreation and sport sectors on multiple levels. The reflection is also an opportunity for me to get to know my students. Consistent with the leisure studies literature, my students generally indicate LRS plays a significant role in developing and maintaining valued identities (e.g., Haggard & Williams, 1992), forming and sustaining relationships (e.g., Kleiber, 1999), and developing a range of skills from learning how to knit to learning how to be part of a team. LRS also is described as critical in helping them release and cope with stress (e.g., Iwasaki, 2001) and supports their ability to manage their mental health including anxiety and depression (e.g., Fenton et al., 2018). Finally, several students indicate LRS is a source of income and offers them a routine and structure in their day.

Because of that first assignment, I was aware of some ways that my students’ personal lives could be affected by Covid-19. With communities across Canada shutting down leisure, recreation and sport activities and spaces, students would have limited access, if any, to some of their valued LRS activities. Experiencing constraints to valued LRS activities can lead to a variety of feelings such as a sense of loss, sadness, disappointment, frustration, and anger (Jackson, 2005).

### **How Humans Learn: The Link between Emotion and Learning**

The impact of the Covid-19 disruption and the potential for the resulting emotions to affect students’ ability to learn was also at the forefront of my mind. Over reading week, 10 days prior, I had read Joshua Eyer’s (2019) book, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories of How Humans Learn*. The chapter on Emotion emphasizes the connections between emotion and cognition and how positive and negative emotions can affect learning. Cognition includes processes such as memory, problem solving, attention and planning. There is less agreement in the literature about what constitutes emotion. However, Eyer identifies Cavanaugh’s (2016) work as helpful. In her book, *The Spark of Learning*, she defines emotion as “complex, multifaceted phenomena that combine experiential elements (“feelings”), physiology reactions (palms sweating, heart racing, brain activation patterns changing), and social and expressive components (facial expressions, body language)” (p. 15). Thinking (cognition) and feeling (emotion) are integrated in the brain and can enhance or detract from learning (Eyer, 2019).

Eyer (2019) explains that engaging students’ emotions (e.g., fear, anger) can support them in making connections with the material in ways that are both meaningful and improves learning processes (e.g., memory). He also discusses how unregulated emotion can block productive cognitive activity. Students activate coping mechanisms to regulate their emotions. At times, however, they may not be able to do so. The result can be lack of focus and this is when cognitive performance can be impacted negatively. As I prepared for the transition to ADM, I recognized that students may not be able to activate typical mechanisms for emotion regulation and their

cognitive activities could be affected as a result. I also viewed that same emotion as an opportunity to make meaningful links with course content.

Eyler's (2019) discussion of caring pedagogy and ideas related to caring for students as learners and human beings was another section of the Emotion chapter that I re-read as I prepared for ADM. When I originally read Eyler's book, the idea that caring as vital to learning resonated with me. While I recognized some of my own practices as a teacher fit within aspects of caring pedagogy (e.g., learning student names, providing individual feedback on progress), I had not previously been aware of the specific links between caring, emotion, and cognition. Noddings (1992) positions care as the "bedrock of all successful education" (p. 27) in part because "students will listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter" (p. 35). Noddings (2012) further specifies that care must be relational whereby teachers do not make assumptions about students, but instead are responsive to students' expressed needs. Eyler (2019) prompted me to consider what actions I could take to "care for" my students in the final weeks of the term and Noddings' (2012) work reminded me not to assume too much.

### **Practices for Transitioning**

I perceived Eyler's (2019) discussion about engaging emotion for meaningful connection to content, the impact of unregulated emotion, and the role of caring in learning as relevant for consideration as I prepared for ADM. Below, I outline four practices that I implemented to support students.

**Acknowledging the challenges of a global pandemic.** I wanted to communicate that I cared about my students as both learners and human beings. Therefore, my first email indicated my awareness that students were likely experiencing a variety of emotions with the announcement that in-person classes were suspended. I indicated that I realized some had lost their part-time income, were separated from close friends and study partners, were missing valued activities (e.g., volunteering, sport participation), and had no access to important spaces in their lives (e.g. the gym, the library, gathering places on campus). I imagined that they, like me, might be struggling to focus amidst the uncertainty. I was also clear that there were other aspects of the transition they were experiencing that I could not fully appreciate. My goal was to communicate that I was using the information I had already learned about them as human beings to imagine at least some of what their experience might involve, but was also not assuming to know the entirety of their lived experience. I encouraged students to take care of themselves, keep in touch with each other, and to reach out to me with any questions or concerns.

**Maintaining a presence.** Consistent with caring pedagogy that Eyler (2019) outlines, I wanted to maintain a presence for students even though it would not be a physical one. Although I was not certain what the remaining weeks of the term would look like when the switch to ADM was announced, I emailed my students and explained what I was going to do to prepare (e.g., attend MS Teams learning sessions), when I would be in touch next (e.g., in three days and by 4:30 p.m. that day), and what decisions I hoped to make by then (e.g., format for delivering remaining

content). I repeated this pattern of communication during the 10 days between when the suspension of in-person classes was announced and when ADM began. My goal was to lessen feelings of uncertainty and anxiety gradually about expectations related to content, assignments, deadlines, and assessment.

I also held drop-in office hours through Zoom. Three students had indicated that Internet access during the day was challenging. More than one person (e.g., a parent and the student) using video calling at the same time caused problems with Internet quality. In response, I offered both daytime and evening office hours each week. My goal was to be accessible for face-time discussions about questions or concerns related to the course.

**Harnessing emotion.** Appreciating that students were experiencing a range of emotions and that it was possible that they were struggling to activate coping mechanism, I wanted to be sensitive to emotion and use it to engage their thinking about course material. Their final assignment was a set of five questions that encouraged them to make linkages between course concepts and to use concepts to discuss scenarios. They had already received four questions in advance of the ADM announcement. I changed one question to allow students to link the concepts within the question (leisure literacy and physical literacy) specifically an environment in which access to leisure and physical activity facilities was limited (parallel to Covid-19 restrictions). The fifth question was also developed with Covid-19 in mind. I asked students to reflect on how Covid-19 was influencing their leisure and those close to them. They needed to include discussion of concepts covered throughout the course (e.g., freedom, third place, social capital, constraints to leisure, social justice, equity). The work submitted by students for that final question demonstrated that reflecting on their current experience was an opportunity for them to develop meaningful and relevant connections with various course concepts. As one student wrote as part of her response,

I have really been thinking about the concept of ‘freedom to’ choose leisure. I have not had the freedom to choose to go to the gym, but I had the freedom to choose to do go for walks in my neighbourhood. If I focus on the freedom I lost, my attitude about what I do have freedom to choose is negative (I am grumpy). I feel like I am settling or that maybe I am ‘constrained into’ that leisure. That helped me understand better how attitudes affect our leisure experience (which we talked about in class but not really in this way) especially how attitudes can ‘constrain enjoyment’.

This student included and make linkages with three different concepts in this one paragraph alone.

**Chunking remaining course material.** Once I determined that their final assignment would include two questions in which they would reflect on the impact of a global pandemic on leisure, I considered which of the remaining course concepts would best fit with that discussion. I cut one of the three remaining topics. In general, my 80-minute classes have about 40 minutes of content delivery intermixed with 40 minutes of class discussion or small group activities. Recognizing that

students' focus could be limited particularly if they were struggling to regulate their emotions, I organized the material into smaller pieces and delivered multiple, shorter recorded lectures with the content students needed to be able to respond to the questions. My goal was to pare down the material to what was essential and motivate focus for short periods of time. I perceived quality learning of less material as better than limited learning of more material.

### **Conclusion**

My intent in reading Eyer's (2019) book was to expand my understanding of students' learning processes and to acquire new knowledge to integrate into my approach to teaching in the 2020-2021 academic year. However, Covid-19 presented an opportunity for me to apply some of that information more immediately. In particular, early student communications alerted me to the stress and anxiety students were experiencing. My knowledge of the role of leisure in students' personal lives contributed to some general understanding of how the mass shutdown of non-essential business (including leisure activities and spaces) could impact students' lives and coping mechanisms. This was, indeed, my first experience in 20 years of teaching, with facilitating learning during a crisis. Acknowledging the challenges of living and learning during a global pandemic and maintaining a presence while at a distance represented efforts to continue to care for my students. Recognizing that emotion can be harnessed and allows students to connect with content in a meaningful way, I developed opportunities for students to reflect on the applicability of course concepts to their ongoing real-life situation. Finally, appreciating that students' ability to activate mechanisms to regulate emotions could be compromised and blocking cognitive activity, I scaled back the content delivered and delivered it into smaller chunks. Outside of a pandemic, and in hindsight, I recognize these practices could support individual students in any type of learning context and situation who might be experiencing a difficult time (e.g., relationship challenges, stress about workload) in which emotion could be blocking cognitive activity. I urge all others in teaching positions to consider the role of emotion in designing learning experiences.

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