Shared vulnerability: Transparency as facilitator during pandemic learning

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Abstract

This chapter explores the intentional use of transparency while teaching an online MSW course during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. First I recognize how the unfolding crisis necessitated altered boundaries between myself and students. Then I present four ways I used transparency to help students stay engaged and involved in the course, including changing expectations, expressing feelings, prioritizing safety and wellbeing, and requesting help. Finally I reflect upon how these Spring 2020 adjustments inform my future pedagogy.

Shared vulnerability: Transparency as facilitator during pandemic learning

There was a marked difference in how I interacted with my MSW students as we navigated our theory and practice course in Spring 2020, and I think it has altered my teaching forever. Like many of my colleagues, I did not have the time or space during the unfolding pandemic to completely process my own emotions and guarantee my own stability prior to interacting with students. Counter to my clinical training, I was more vulnerable with my students than previously and I leaned heavily upon the trauma-informed principle of transparency. This Narrative InterView explores how I used transparency to support my students' growth, my personal self-regulation, and our relationships.

Shifting Boundaries

When reflecting upon how I and my graduate Master of Social Work (MSW) students navigated our theory and practice course in Spring 2020, there was a qualitative difference in our interactions compared to previous semesters. I am a student-centered educator with a history as a clinical social worker who is highly mindful of my boundaries. In my clinical work I was trained to be aware of my reactions and countertransference but not to burden my clients with many of my personal details. While interpretation of professional boundaries can vary by training and culture, mine required me to only share personal information about myself or my experiences if I knew it would help client and not for my own gratification. While I have strived to offer authentic relationships with both clients and students, I have also always tended to be dismissive of my personal story except when sharing clinical anecdotes in the service of student learning. This matches not only my training but also my personality. Teaching while the pandemic unfolded in Spring 2020, however, did not allow me to completely compartmentalize my needs and emotions from my students. I, and many others, had to shift to a place of greater vulnerability and honesty with more permeable boundaries.

Shared trauma between clients and clinicians has been previously described as demanding additional vulnerability from the clinician (Saakvitne, 2002) and I experienced this within my teaching role. I was intentionally trying to craft a different holding environment for students: to be available as an affirming support, to demonstrate acknowledging personal distress, and to role model efforts to self-regulate. My clinical work has familiarized me with holding environments – where parents or caregivers, (or therapists) provide a sufficiently helpful balance of attention and space to their children (or clients) in a way that facilitates growth and

emotional development. As our mutual boundaries shifted, I adjusted our shared environment to be a more accommodating space for students to feel slightly more secure, amidst so much uncertainty and fear. I believe the increased transparency not only helped students continue navigating their graduate work but also was what I needed to remain engaged in my role as their instructor. I was transparent in four specific ways.

Changing Expectations

First, I was transparent around my capacity to meet my job expectations. At one point it took me almost three weeks to return feedback and grades to students, at least two weeks longer than usual. I made an announcement to the class apologizing for this and recognizing that I had been so overwhelmed with both my emotions and my new duties (I had shared that I had moved in with my brother's family to help care for my two year-old niece) that it had been hard to concentrate. I remember wondering how harsh my evaluations would be. No one ever mentioned it.

Pandemic teaching in Spring 2020 required me to unpack my personal layers of privilege, altering my perspective. My expectation that day to day life is not 'supposed to' be accompanied by continuous concern for the safety of myself and my loved ones, economic doubts, and feelings of powerlessness reveals how privileged I have been. I realize now that what helped me be vulnerable with my students and maintain my own hope was trusting that there would be a future time when predictability would return, and we would essentially conquer the virus. However, if I were to shift into believing that there is no end to the distress of this crisis, I will have to find a different way to maintain my hope for my students. Many folks have had to negotiate such crises as consistent life companions, including some of my students and colleagues with trauma histories. Some of us will have to learn to build a life on moving ground.

Expressing Feelings

A second way I was transparent was with my discussion of my feelings. Every module I send a video announcement reflecting upon recent learning or clarifying assignments. In Spring 2020, I started prefacing these with my recognition of the distress and pain we were in and the horror we were witnessing. I acknowledged how hard it was not to know what was coming while trying to make future plans. I always expressed my concern for them and emphasized my availability. I expect they could read the distress on my face—from my own fatigue, disorientation, and lack of makeup. But I trusted that they could also witness my commitment to them, in my words and in the consistency of the video messages. Instructor-student relationships are central to learning and they seemed even more important during a pandemic that demanded isolation.

I certainly had to process some of my feelings in order to be present for students. Acknowledging and managing my own grief was crucial. I had to find a way to make sufficient space for grieving pandemic losses without using it as an excuse to withdraw from my students. As I allowed myself to name the grief, usually elsewhere but occasionally with students, I could then focus on the tasks at hand.

In hindsight this was not a challenge that eased with the passage of time, but has instead shifted to a more constant companion. Finding hope and offering my genuine self to students appears to be vital in all seasons of a pandemic, but it does not seem to become easier. In terms

of teaching, I sometimes find myself grieving the comfort and familiarity of my previous boundaries. It is difficult to differentiate my pandemic teaching from my pandemic living. The two have gone hand in hand these many months. The structure of the teaching helps me get through the times of social distance and isolation, however, because of the severity of student need and online modality, I am also never quite free of teaching demands. I grade, read, write, and watch tv in the same place. Days are no longer marked by seeing friends, visiting family, or trying restaurants. I find myself responding to emails and thinking about my classes throughout the day, every day. I realize that what gets us through the short term may not be healthy for the long term. But each of us are finding ways to do what we have to now for a better future tomorrow. This is what our neighbors are doing. This is what we ask of clients. As educators it is what we have always asked of students.

Prioritizing Safety and Wellbeing

The third way I was transparent was in asserting a realistic assessment of the importance of graduate school amidst a pandemic and growing recession. Students emailed about falling behind while struggling with family job loss or personal illness. I affirmed the priority of wellness and safety for themselves and their families. While this is obvious to instructors, students may not trust their faculty recognize this. In email responses I got from students, they thanked me for taking their distress seriously.

Sometimes, my students' heavier personal doubts mirrored my own struggles. During a highly attended synchronous class meeting in mid-April 2020, I found myself facing student questions such as: "How does school even matter right now? How are we supposed to focus on work? How come classes are going on as if everything is normal?" The beauty of these questions is they demanded I find my own conviction as I constructed an answer that I tried to share both directly and through my actions: "Things aren't normal right now. Things are hard. Some people are facing more challenges than others. Not everyone can prioritize school right now. That makes total sense. There are more important things than graduate school. But it is also my role, and the role of our school, to keep providing opportunities to help prepare you to be social workers. This world needs well educated, thoughtful, and critical thinking social workers. This world needs social workers who ground their ideas in evidence and oppose injustices. If managing classes is not realistic for you now, I get it, let's talk. We each need something different. Otherwise, one step at a time." Normalizing the excruciating demands of these circumstances while continuing to find value and meaning in our academic efforts ended up helping both myself and my students.

In order to continue prioritizing wellbeing, I am learning to make flexibility more of a default position. In the past I maintained strict assignment deadlines for students excepting crisis situations. Now I am trying to practice more generous respect for late assignments and view mediocre papers as possibly indicative of someone being extraordinarily stressed rather than reluctant to grow. I am reminded that some peoples' social, familial, financial, or medical distress were not increased by COVID-19, but were already at pandemic levels, perhaps for much of their lives. As a middle aged educator two decades past my MSW, I find I have sometimes forgotten how hard things can be when you are a student. As a white, middle class, cisgender female, I may have never known how hard simply moving through this society can be. More generous flexibility seems better than less.

Asking for Help

The fourth way I was transparent was around asking students for their help. Once COVID hit, I eliminated late deductions. This felt like an easy way to alleviate some stress and create greater equity because none of the students had elected to take graduate courses during a pandemic, and without this adjustment only the most privileged would have found the time and resources to maintain the rigorous schedule. However, I knew that if all assignments were turned in at the semester's end, then their discussion board interactions would be less meaningful, and I would be overwhelmed with grading. So, I asked that students who were not feeling overburdened keep to our timeline, which would help them regulate their assignment pace, put less burden on their peers who were struggling with major life disruptions, and alleviate my grading burden. I initially anticipated some student pushback or protest because I was still requesting timely submissions while explicitly allowing for consequence-free late assignments. However, there were zero issues with this. While some students turned items in late, many others submitted on time. I think there was something valuable in identifying a way that students could help each other, and it freed me from being concerned I was being inequitable because of the variation in expectation. I expect the personal power to decide on a deadline and the students' mutual good will alleviated the competitive pressure to have all the advantages of their fellow students. Or perhaps it was the heavy dose of reality that the pandemic brought with it that helped the students and myself re-evaluate our priorities.

Moving Forward

The instructor-student relationship is crucial in educating social workers. Teaching online during the pandemic called for this relational connection in an urgent way and transparency helped me build this connection. I received more emails of thanks from students in my Spring 2020 class than I ever had in my previous 19 semesters of teaching. I think my greater vulnerability and more intentional effort to role model emotional regulation helped these relationships. One student described me in an evaluation as "a real human being," and another student let me know I could contact her in the future if I needed a "student" perspective. Previous semester evaluation feedback centered on my enthusiasm for teaching, rapidity of response, timely feedback, and high expectations. Spring 2020 student comments expressed more personal gratitude and offered more description of our connection and my care for them. In past online courses I taught, I struggled with the sense that my students did not get to know the 'real' me. The limited synchronous opportunities and technology seemed to alter student-instructor interactions. The Spring 2020 classes revealed to me how genuine online connections could be and I think those students came to know me as well as my previous on-the-ground students did.

While I hope these students do not encounter a pandemic again, they will be rocked by personal tragedy, extreme client distress, and existential threats such as climate change. In this pandemic you try to create what good things you can. I hope modeling transparency in our shared crisis helped students envision how to do this in their futures.

In my future teaching, I plan to be more actively accommodating of individual need while still being equitable to the entire class. We never know when someone is experiencing a personal pandemic. I am curious how I can build class community and structure assignment opportunities so that as a class we are strengthening and supporting each individual.

I am very proud of my students and myself for seeing the semester through. The Spring 2020 semester is not the only pandemic teaching semester, but it is when we first faced this crisis. We helped each other and believed in the importance of the preparation we were doing. We chose to move forward with our companions of uncertainty and fear. I think we have to continue to honor what drew us to social work to begin with and where we find our renewal: in our connections, our faith, our moments of peace, joy, or laughter. This can help us to hold ourselves and our students gently even as we navigate this terrain. The pandemic is changing us, and we want at least some of those changes to be for the better.

Reference

Saakvitne, K. W. (2002). Shared trauma: The therapist's increased vulnerability. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 12*(3), 443-449. www.doi.org/10.1080/10481881209348678