2024

THE Teaching PROFESSOR

A compilation of articles from *The Teaching Professor*

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LET'S GET REAL: DOES USING AI AID LEARNING?

REGAN A. R. GURUNG

Barely a day goes by without the latest invitation to a seminar on artificial intelligence or some handwaving about how AI could end the world as we know it. AI has already changed the world. Google searches incorporate AI. Most websites you interact with use AI. Even the library has AI-driven virtual helpers. Still, AI has been perfect fodder for futurists and science fiction fans. Recently, Hollywood gave us The Creator, a movie about a near future where AI wreaks havoc. Yes, again. After initially focusing on how students can use AI to cheat, higher education is finally spending more time on how it can use AI for teaching and learning. Yes, the ethical use of AI is important, but there are more important questions for us. Here's a big one: Does using AI aid learning?

I previously shared an overarching framework that serves as my guide for AI use, just as my teaching philosophy guides my course design and instructional methods. By incorporating many key considerations and student learning, I try and get a FEAL for AI. This faster, ethical, accurate learning is one easy way for me to assess whether AI should be used for an assignment or activity. It is difficult for students and even instructors to know whether using AI will aid learning. Research is needed, and the good news is that research is being done.

While there are many projects in the works, the most recent meta-analysis on AI and learning was published in January this year. In it, Wu and Yu (2024) statistically combined the results from many different studies on chatbots. AI chatbots or conversational agents, like ChatGPT, interact with their users, incorporating a range of AI techniques, such as natural language processing, machine learning, and neural networks. Chatbots can save users' inputs and questions (prompts) and learn from them to provide better outputs. The researchers examined various databases and found studies where chatbots were used to improve learning, defined as the extent to which students gain and apply valuable skills (p. 13). They found 1,387 potential documents and, after removing those that did not have experimental designs, lacked statistical information, did not measure learning, were written in a language other than English, or were irrelevant or incomplete, focused on 24 articles.

For us quantitative geeks, meta-analyses are the holy grail of research studies as they combine the results of many studies, helping us generalize across contexts. By combining findings, meta-analyses ensure that we're not misled by studies that may not replicate. So the big question is, what did Wu and Yu find?

First, the good news. There was a statistically significant effect of using chatbots on learning in many realms. Using AI improved learning performance, motivation to learn, the sense of being able to succeed as a learning (i.e., self-efficacy), interest, and the perceived value of learning. Chatbot use also relieved learners' anxiety. Statistically, effect sizes, a measure of how strong a relationship is, can range from 0 onward, with numbers above 0.40 signifying a significant and strong effect. In this meta-analysis, some effects were as high as 1.40 (value of learning) and 1.03 (performance). These positive effects were stronger for college-based studies and when use was under 10 weeks in duration (effect size = 1.18).

Given these findings, we clearly cannot ignore the positive gains of chatbot use. The strong effects of using chatbots were evident across many learning domains. In contrast to past studies showing inconsistent effects of AI chatbots on learning, the results of this paper suggest that students using chatbots could learn better. Given the effects on psychological variables such as motivation and self-efficacy, this paper urges us to look beyond just the ethical implications of AI use and toward how AI use can influence noncognitive psychological factors. If using chatbots can increase interest in learning, as demonstrated here, then there's a need to conduct research on several potential mediators and moderators of the relationship between AI use and learning outcomes.

Now the bad news. We need to be cautious. First, meta-analyses are notorious for obfuscating critical differences in design. There are a lot of devils in the details. As much as I am enthused by this paper, it does focus on only 24 studies. Furthermore, the studies used a range of learning outcomes (e.g., writing skills, test scores), and many of them had small sample sizes. Second, most of the studies included focused on learning language. These factors make generalization difficult.

There is no denying the fact that students can use AI in many ways, even to cheat on assignments (Bubaš & Čižmešija, 2023), but Wu and Yu's meta-analysis provides strong evidence of educational gains from chatbot use. The effects on learning of AI use were large. These findings add to research showing that AI can greatly benefit teachers and students (Rahman & Watanobe, 2023) and increase student skills and motivation (Wollny et al., 2021).

Of course, more research is needed, but this piece shows that AI chatbots use does lead to improvements in learning. Now for more fine-tuned studies. In my lab, we are looking at whether using AI on writing assignments or even to take quizzes changes learning as measured on exams. We are also looking at whether getting content from a video of a live person versus an avatar of that person will have similar effects on learning. Early results are not showing that AI use or the AI instructor have any difference on exam scores. There is promise of AI helping us teach and helping learn. We need to reflect more on the best ways to harness the benefits of this tool, ask the right questions, and be sure to systematically and intentionally test AI efficacy.

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ESTABLISHING CLASS NORMS THAT PROMOTE LEARNING

STEPHEN L. CHEW

In 1936, psychologist Muzafer Sherif reported a landmark study on the creation of social norms. Sherif made use of an optical illusion called the autokinetic effect. When people view a stationary pinpoint of light in a dark environment, they will perceive the light to move in random directions. For example, on a dark night, if you look at a single star, it will start to appear to move. Sherif put subjects in a darkened room with a single point of light and had them report the light's movement. Participants were alone, with another person, or with two other people. When subjects were alone, their perceptions of the illusory movement varied considerably. When, however, they were part of a group and reporting their perceptions aloud, the group quickly converged on a common judgment of the light's path. Furthermore, when subjects who were part of a group were subsequently tested individually, they maintained the norms established by the group.

Social norms are socially derived standards for what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior within a group. For every group we belong to, there are behaviors that the group deems appropriate and worthy and others that the group finds unsuitable and objectionable. These norms regulate our behavior when we are part of a group. Sherif's study revealed several important characteristics about how norms come about. Norms arise even in small groups of two or three and even when other group members are strangers we likely will never meet again. Norm formation is fast and, once a norm takes hold, it affects our behavior even when we are apart from the group. Finally, norm formation does not require conscious negotiation or communication, we establish norms simply by interacting with others. When you are at a social gathering with people you don't know, there are probably topics of conversation that you won't bring up until you are sure it is acceptable within the group, and if you aren't certain what the appropriate behavior might be, you look to others to try to discern the norm for proper behavior.

Research on social norms applies directly to the classroom. When a class meets for the first time, whether online or in person, social norms form quickly among students and without conscious deliberation. Some norms are helpful for academic success, such as students' asking questions, and some are counterproductive, such as students' spending class time texting and checking social media. Once in place, the norms are hard to change. Teachers must work to influence the norms established in each course they teach, and they need to start on the first day of class to have the best chance of doing so.

Here are some norms worth pursuing:

- In this class, you will learn interesting and important information. On the first day of class, teachers should present some course related information that most students will find interesting and useful. Ideally, it should be counterintuitive, surprising, and thought provoking. Paul Hanstedt captures this idea in his column "On the First Day of Class, Begin with Intrigue." He suggests starting the first class with a "beautiful problem" for students to discuss that will evoke their curiosity. In his general education humanities courses, he starts with a work of art or a poem. Students may not know enough to see the beauty in the work, but when he helps them see the beauty, students learn about the work, they learn about him, and they learn what he can teach them. During the first class period, I always give a mini-lecture on what psychology is and how it differs from common sense. I warn students ahead of class that I will lecture and they should come prepared to take notes. I establish the norm of substantive learning on the first day. I don't lecture the whole class period. Students are still transitioning to college, and I don't want to establish the norm that I will overwhelm them. Students should learn to expect that when they attend class, they will learn important and useful information, and that attending class is one of the best and easiest ways to learn that information.

- I am here to help you learn and succeed. The teacher should establish themselves as a partner in helping students learn and succeed. If students see the teacher as an obstacle to successfully completing the course, then neither the students nor teacher are likely to find the course a positive learning experience. Creating a norm of a supportive learning environment can start with a greeting from the instructor before the course begins. The syllabus can also emphasize positive expectations that the professor will help students who put in the right kind and amount of effort every chance to succeed. Students should see the teacher as trustworthy and approachable.

- While class is going on, we stay engaged in learning. Establish a class norm of engaged learning, which I readily admit is easier said than done. Establish a pace and level of detail for the class so that students feel they have to pay attention or risk missing important information. They should feel slightly rushed in their ability to keep up with class presentations. Too often I've seen teachers who meander through a topic without clear organization and go off on tangents of interest only to themselves. When students perceive that nothing of importance or value is on offer, they will initiate off-task activities. An engaging presentation is well organized, concise, and to the point, with plenty of opportunities for review and formative assessment.

- You are encouraged to speak up in class. On the first day of class, the teacher should establish the norm that students speak up in class to contribute or ask questions. If the teacher does not promote the norm of speaking up, then they are furthering the norm of staying silent. A teacher can't go through the first few classes without giving students any chance to speak and then expect them to immediately feel comfortable contributing and asking questions.

- On the first day, the teacher should have an activity that encourages students to speak up in class, such as a think-pair-share. The activity should have some relevance to the class, but more importantly, it should be one that all students can participate in—"When you think of psychology, what is the first thought that comes to mind?" or "Did you have a favorite poem growing up?" or "Think of ways that chemistry impacts your life," for example.

- This class is a community, and you are a member. A great deal of research shows the positive influence of a sense of community and belonging on student motivation and success (e.g., Shea et al., 2006). This is especially true in online courses and likely became even more important during remote learning early in the pandemic. A sense of community occurs when students see themselves in fellowship with other class members due to common experiences and goals. Belonging means that students feel like fully accepted and respected members of the community. They identify with being part of the class and enjoy talking about the class with other members. At the beginning of a course, give students a chance to meet and talk to each other to start building community. For example, in my general psychology class, which consists mostly of first-year students, I have them do a series of think-pair-share activities early in the semester. I tell them to introduce themselves to the people they pair with. In later activities, I tell them to pair with someone they haven't met yet. At the beginning of the semester, I assign members of the class to small groups. I give them discussion assignments, but I also encourage them to rely on the groups if they need help from other class members. Have students carry out tasks that are distinctive to your section of the course.

We tend to think of differences among students in terms of personality traits. Some are more talkative and likely to ask questions, and some are more studious and serious about learning. We often fail to appreciate the power of the social context within any group, including our classes. Students may be active and engaged participants in one class but passive note-takers in another. They may seek out the professor with questions in one class but feel it isn't worthwhile in another. Social norms influence how students act in our classes.

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IT'S TIME TO DISCUSS STUDENT EVALUATIONS BIAS WITH OUR STUDENTS (SERIOUSLY)

NICHOLE DEWALL

Are you sitting down? Good. Because I have a shocking confession.

For the past few years, I've reserved 40 minutes of class time each semester to discuss bias in student evaluations of teaching (SETs) with my students. You know, the ones who are actually evaluating their teachers? I know. Scandalous. Why? Well, because if I do, then others won't have to (more on that later). And because I find student evaluations essential and want them to stick around. And because I had to do something in response to the overwhelming evidence of harmful bias, and the something I know how to do is teach. Here's an FAQ. Why involve students?

SCENE: INTERIOR—NOON—TUESDAY. "What are you reading right now, Professor DeWall?" Nearly a dozen students had squeezed into my office for our weekly Literary Interest Society meeting. "Well, most recently," I gestured toward my laptop, still open to the Chronicle, "another article on bias in student evals."

"Bias?" one asked. "Yeah," I said, "higher scores for attractive instructors and lenient graders; race and gender may play a role." Silence. Blank stares. I snapped my laptop shut like I'd been caught spilling state secrets.
"Why don't we talk to students about this?" I texted a colleague later that day. "That's a no-brainer," he replied. "When the parents are fighting, they shouldn't put their children in the middle."

"Makes sense," I thought. "But wait . . . Why would I treat my students like children who don't belong at the grown-ups table? If both measurement and equity biases are as persistent as research suggests, then shouldn't I be doing more than my perfunctory, 'I value your feedback. Here's some extra credit' spiel? If I'm going to ask students—OK, relentlessly pester students—to complete SETs, shouldn't I teach them how to do so thoughtfully, self-critically, and with attention to the larger context (or, at the very least, with more care than a Yelp review)? And what if the most elegant solution had been right in front of me all along? In the middle. Where my students are."

So many questions. It was time for some research. Turns out, reactions to SETs' bias range from "Meh, it's inevitable" to "They're flawed, but they're all we've got" to "How can we sleep at night?" The debate's hypercharged tenor didn't surprise me, of course: of all the issues in higher ed, this one seems tailor-made to tug at the seams of how we imagine ourselves as professionals. And as people.

We want students to have a voice but know their voices can sometimes wound. We're eager for feedback but leery of how our institution may use it. We cherish students' firsthand perspectives on our teaching but wonder—deep down—how accurate they really are. Scylla, meet Charybdis.

The most intriguing aspect of scholarship on SETs' bias? Its peculiar hourglass shape: wide at both ends and not much in the middle. That is, we've largely focused on our choices before and after submission and neglected—(avoided?)—direct interventions with students themselves. Lead-up and aftermath; prologue and epilogue. Like if we could just get it right in pre- and postproduction, the movie would film itself.

On the front end, we wonder whether we should call them "student perceptions of learning" or "student experience questionnaires" instead (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021); offer inducements like extra credit (Jaquett, VanMaaren, & Williams, 2016); rely on qualitative or quantitative questions (Varel, 2022); administer them in person or online (Stanny & Arruda, 2017); worry about scale effects (Courey & Lee, 2021); or keep them anonymous (Fowler, 2019). On the back end, we offer methods for incorporating students' feedback into our teaching (Boysen, 2016); advice on how to filter out abusive and unhelpful comments (Supiano, 2019); opinions on using SETs in tenure and promotion decisions (Lakeman et al., 2023); and suggestions on how many glasses of wine to drink before reading them (OK, that one's mine). We've even created our own subgenre: the tips-on-how-to-handle-negative-evals essay, with subtitles like "Seven Ways to Soothe the Sting" (Artze-Vega, 2014) and "These 6 Strategies Can Help You Cope" (Allen et al., 2022).

I found only two studies on direct, student-centered interventions—anti-bias language on evaluation forms and email reminders—and these showed promising (Peterson et al., 2019), albeit mixed (Key & Ardoin, 2019), results. The most comprehensive meta-analysis of SETs' bias to date has since identified this approach as "an area ripe for future research" (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021, p. 80).

If merely cutting and pasting boilerplate anti-bias language onto an evaluation form showed promise, maybe we'd gain even more traction if we discussed the issue with students directly?
It's worth a try.

Isn't having this conversation unprofessional?

I used to think so. Now I think it's unprofessional not to.

Because here's what's really unprofessional: Inconsistency. Opacity. In the end, excluding students from this conversation felt misaligned with everything else that I valued in my teaching. Antithetical, even.

With everything else: "Take intellectual risks. Don't avoid important conversations just because they're uncomfortable."
With SETs: "Discuss bias in student evaluations? No way. Too thorny."

With everything else: "Think critically. Always. But especially about diversity, power, and privilege."
With SETs: "Never mind the overwhelming body of evidence that suggests SETs' bias may disadvantage faculty of color, women faculty, and other marginalized groups. Please submit your evaluations by the last day of classes."

With everything else: "Giving meaningful feedback is a skill that you can learn. Let's practice!"
With SETs: "I can't waste class time preparing students for this writing task! I'll focus on completion rates instead."

With everything else: "Always consider the rhetorical contexts—audience, purpose —of the texts that you produce."
With SETs: "You needn't worry yourselves about who sees evaluations or how they're used. Here's some extra credit."

With everything else: "You can trust me. I'll be honest and transparent with you."
With SETs: "Pay no attention to the bias behind the curtain. Here, have some cookies!"

OK, I've never done the cookies thing (anything I bake would work against me). But withholding the whole story from students became disconcerting. Then uncomfortable. Then intolerable. And just plain unnecessary. "What they don't know won't hurt them" just wasn't going to cut it anymore.

Isn't this a waste of class time?
It depends how you define waste.

For the record, I'm notoriously jealous of class time. I even nurse an irrational grudge against the tornado drill that gobbles up 20 minutes of my Tuesday morning class once per semester.

But talking with students about SETs' bias is not unlike that drill: essential preparation for responsible membership in a college community. Bonus points if this conversation is embedded in a course that students typically take early on, like first-year seminar or English composition. After all, completing SETs is not an insignificant part of our students' college experiences.

Let's crunch the numbers: if my students average four classes per semester, they'll complete at least 32 evaluations; tack on a few music lessons, labs, and internships, and we're pushing 40. Students have no business being as obsessed with SETs as we are (sidebar: neither do we), but complete obliviousness shouldn't really be the goal either. With anything.

For me, this conversation provides a valuable end-of-term cumulative assessment for the methods of persuasion, logical fallacies, and feedback strategies that we've covered during the semester. I won't pretend to know how a psychology, sociology, or human resources class may incorporate the conversation, but fundamental attribution error, gender norms, and diversity in the workplace spring to mind.

And anyway, there are learning objectives, and then there are Learning Objectives. You know, of the college-should-prepare-students-to-be-good-human-beings variety. I suspect this conversation about SETs' bias aligns with your institution's overall mission.

Let's check. Does your institution's mission statement mention leadership? Mine too. Engagement? Indeed. Citizenship? Ditto. Lifelong learning? We're on a roll! My discussions of SETs' bias often support each of these outcomes even more directly than my discipline-specific course content. If contributing our skills, labor, and expertise in service of our employers' missions is a waste of class time, then we may need to rethink our approach.

Isn't this conversation awkward?

Come on, since when do we avoid awkward conversations? Anyone who's sat through a few faculty meetings would think we gravitate toward them (ba-dum-ching!).

And besides, nothingcould be as awkward as the cloak-and-dagger routine I performed during my first few years of teaching. Me, circa 2004: slink sheepishly into class; distribute evals (on paper—how quaint!); mumble something about "teaching effectiveness"; get the hell out of there, fingers crossed behind my back. Or, worse yet, remind students via email so I'd avoid a face-to-face conversation altogether. As my 13-year-old would say, "So cringe." Me, circa now: "OK, everyone. As I've mentioned a few times this semester, we're going to spend 40 minutes today discussing bias in student evaluations. Here's why I think this conversation is important." Better.

I'll admit that discussing SETs' bias with students did feel unnatural at first. It was funny, really: I had no problem engaging with them on race in Othello; antisemitism in The Canterbury Tales; or feminism in Beowulf. But this felt different. Inappropriate. Unseemly. A how-the-sausage-gets-made conversation that didn't belong in the classroom.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that we disclose every aspect of our work lives with students; frankly, I'm often surprised by some instructors' willingness to discuss what I consider to be need-to-know-only details with students. Then again, I descend from a long line of tight-lipped Midwesterners for whom "airing one's dirty laundry" was the ultimate sin, so I won't even complain about classroom technology glitches in front of students ("Shakespeare did just fine without the internet, and so can we!").

But talking with students about SETs' bias is not the same as complaining to them about budget issues or staffing crises; those are best left behind closed doors. This, however, is a controversial, complicated topic in which our students have a stake and over which they can actually exercise some control. Isn't that the very definition of a teachable moment?

Isn't this conversation coercive, like we're trying to influence the outcome? Good question. First, tone matters: you're going for calibration, not coercion. Less "LET'S RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE!" and more "Guess what? We all possess miserly human brains that are prone to bias. What an exciting opportunity to think about our own thinking!" Neither fire nor brimstone. If you use <u>cognitive wrappers</u> throughout the semester like I do, then engaging in another metacognitive activity isn't a huge stretch for students.

And let me be very clear: I am absolutely trying to influence the outcome. If, that is, the outcome we seek is threefold: (1) students who are more practiced in thinking critically about their own potential biases, (2) workplaces that are safer and more equitable for all instructors, and (3) student evaluations that teachers can actually use to improve their teaching. Although some institutions have <u>abandoned them altogether</u>, SETs remain irresistibly cheap, easy, and built for mass distribution, so they'll probably stay put (then again, The Lecture was too, so we'll see). For now, we need to work within the system to find low-impact, commonsense solutions.

Still concerned? Here's my hack: ask your students to complete evaluations for your class a little early, before you discuss bias with them. Our online assessment portal shows me who has submitted evaluations long before I can view what they wrote. That way, I have no skin in the game. And anyway, I'm not having this conversation for me. Or, really, for my students (although it's usually quite productive).

Who, then? Well, here goes: My colleague who's crying in her office because her pregnancy made students "uncomfortable." My colleagues whose courses are inherently more controversial than mine. My women colleagues in STEM disciplines. My colleague—a brilliant teacher and self-declared "profound introvert"—who gets dinged for not exuding the "enthusiasm" that students equate with good teaching. My more vulnerable, untenured colleagues. My contingent colleagues whose already-tenuous employment rides almost exclusively on SET scores. My queer colleague whose student accused him of "brainwashing" them by "acting gay." My colleague whose students' comments about her accent were so vicious that she left the profession all together. To name a few.

And here's the most critical piece: faculty members who stand to be most adversely affected by SETs' bias should not be expected to have these conversations with students. Full stop. Unless they want to, of course. But talking to students may be more treacherous for them: haunted by the specter of backlash; tainted by the appearance of self-interest.

So, who should be putting themselves in the middle? Well, I should be. Tenured professors should be doing the heavy lifting, especially full professors. To be blunt: our privilege can absorb the shock. Imagine if a core group of tenured full professors on each campus committed to having direct, research-based conversations with their students about SETs' bias. Would it turn the tide? I don't know. But it's a start. A ripple. A wave. A . . . sea change?
What does this conversation even look like?

Next month, I'll share a fly-on-the-wall transcript of how it usually goes.

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CULTIVATING SPACE FOR SORROW—AND KINDNESS—IN HIGHER EDUCATION

MAYS IMAD

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.

—Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness"

A few years ago, while reviewing a student's feedback on one of my course evaluations, I came across a profound observation. The student described the class, like many science courses, as "stoic," yearning for more humanity in the learning experience. It struck a chord with me, having been through similar experiences in science courses myself, where the cold, clinical environment can leave us feeling disconnected from our own humanity.

In response, I began to reimagine my STEM courses and embarked on a mission to infuse a dose of humanity into my science classes. I decided to start each session by sharing a poem, a small gesture that has resonated deeply with my students. It's no surprise; many of them carry a heavy emotional burden, often burdened by feelings of loneliness. I've found solace in poetry during my own moments of stagnation, just like many of them.

Like many of you, I've been wrestling with profound grief since October 7, and during these times, the words of people like Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet, have provided solace. In her work, she masterfully explores the intricate dance between sorrow and kindness, a theme that bridges my personal experiences with my professional reflections. Inspired by this, I have been exploring the same relationship in the context of higher education.

Sorrow is a feeling of deep distress or sadness, usually caused by a significant loss and disappointment (Tsikandilakis et al., 2023). Surely, many of us have experienced sadness as it is a typical and natural human emotion that various circumstances can trigger, including the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, failure to achieve a goal, or witnessing the injustices and pain experienced by others (Pies, 2008).

Kindness is a quality characterized by compassion, generosity, and consideration for others (Kumar, 2022). It involves treating others (and ourselves) with empathy, respect, and understanding and seeking to help and support them in their time of need (Brodrick, 2019).

Nye's words about the relationship between kindness and sorrow suggest that it is only through experiencing and working through sorrow that we can truly understand and appreciate what kindness really is in relation to our humanity. To understand sorrow fully extends beyond intellectual engagement; it involves embodying it. By this, I mean experiencing sorrow in a deeply personal way, allowing it to resonate within our own emotional and physical experiences. It's about feeling and living through sorrow, not just contemplating it. It's about perceiving sorrow as an entity that interacts with and influences our emotions and behaviors.

Many of us, our colleagues, and our students are experiencing sorrow. For many students, college has been a particularly challenging time as they navigate new academic, social, and personal pressures. The pandemic exacerbated their academic struggles, financial difficulties, relationship issues, and homesickness while adding an extra layer of stress and uncertainty to their college experiences. They continue to face disruptions to their studies, social lives, and plans for the future. They continue to grapple with isolation and lack of connection, both of which contribute to feelings of sorrow and loneliness. Furthermore, they are acutely aware of and deeply affected by global issues, which compounds their sense of sorrow. They are not only navigating personal and academic challenges but also constantly exposed to news about climate disasters, social injustices, and conflicts, including wars and genocides, around the world. This barrage of distressing information can evoke feelings of helplessness and despair. Many students feel a profound connection to these global crises and struggle with the sense of being unable to effect meaningful change. This awareness and empathy, while commendable, often adds an overwhelming emotional burden, contributing further to their experiences of sorrow and loneliness.

Recently, a great deal has been written about the student disengagement crisis and students' lack of motivation (e.g., Glazier, 2022). I think it is important to recognize that students' disconnection, lack of engagement and motivation may not always be rooted in apathy or laziness, but can also be a result of deep emotional and psychological pain and sorrow. Ann-Claire Lin, then a senior at Colorado College, shared with me earlier this year at the International Society for Contemplative Research conference:

Perhaps because they have so eagerly awaited the day that the pandemic would be "over," it can feel tempting and appealing to skip over the grief for what they have all lost. In many ways, explicitly and implicitly, this is the message that college institutions have given them. There's not a person on our campuses that COVID-19 has not touched, and yet, much of the "processing" of such an upheaval, the sorrow we all felt, if addressed at all, has typically been limited to conversations behind closed doors in the student counseling office.

My colleague Dorothe Bach at the University of Virginia reminded me that while we consider the emotional and psychological challenges students face, it's equally vital to recognize the efforts of educators who have been on the front lines of this crisis. Many instructors have gone to great lengths to acknowledge and address the stresses on students, often adapting their teaching methods, modifying assignments, and offering flexible deadlines. They have worked to create an environment that normalizes the shared experiences of stress and uncertainty, even if these efforts sometimes occur in settings less visible or formal than counseling offices. These adaptations' effectiveness and skillfulness may vary, but these educators' commitment to supporting their students' well-being during unprecedented times should not go unnoticed.

If sorrow is something we all experience, where else should we address it and create spaces to process it? What can sorrow do for higher education and learning? To begin, higher education as a whole must recognize and embrace the idea that learning is social and emotional and embodied—that our bodily experiences and actions are inherently interconnected with our cognitive processes, emotions, and perceptions of the world (**Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007**; **Immordino-Yang, 2016**; **Rendon, 2023**).

Emotions play a multifaceted role in the educational journey, acting as both catalysts and barriers in the learning process. They influence motivation, engagement, memory, and decision-making, shaping the learning experience in profound ways (**Imad, 2022a**). By recognizing this, we can see how emotions like sorrow, when acknowledged and addressed, become essential aspects of the human experience that can foster an environment of growth and understanding. Integrating kindness into this framework does not simply cater to emotional well-being; it leverages the full spectrum of emotions to reinforce the intricate links between cognition, emotion, and the physical body. It is through our diverse emotional experiences that we can develop a deeper appreciation of kindness and its transformative power. By weaving this recognition into the fabric of higher education, we help to cultivate a more holistic, engaging, and meaningful educational experience for everyone involved.

Ann-Claire Lin continues: "Higher education has rarely, if ever, prioritized a space to, as Nye describes, 'wake up' with our sadness, or 'speak to' our distress. However, the sorrow and pain of the COVID-19 pandemic prods us to ask not only the question: Could there be spaces like this in higher ed? but also: Must there be?"

In other words, do we need to create the space to bear witness to each other's loss and pain, to name the loss (and the gain), to mourn together, to remember joy together, even to fall apart and come back together?

Importantly, the spectrum of sorrow in higher education extends beyond the collective grief of global crises. Sorrow can also manifest as a response to engaging with challenging course material. Students in the humanities may grapple with distressing historical events, those in medical fields might confront the pain of human suffering, and learners in areas like law, sciences, and engineering often face ethical dilemmas and environmental concerns that evoke profound emotional responses.

Whatever the specific sources of sorrow, our current academic support systems need to evolve to help students navigate it. This means cultivating a culture that normalizes emotional responses to learning, provides resources for emotional processing, and integrates these support mechanisms into the fabric of the academic experience. It means not only acknowledging sorrow but actively providing tools and spaces for students to process and articulate their emotions, allowing them to move through their educational journeys with resilience and a sense of shared humanity.

I believe that Nye's poem provides us guidance by pointing us to the concept of kindness. Nye suggests that it is only through a mind-body process of coming to know sorrow that kindness makes sense to us and transcend boundaries and imagination. Kindness then becomes a transformative force that "ties your shoes" and allows us to see beauty and possibilities in the world. Kindness becomes a guiding presence that speaks to us and reminds us of what really matters—relationships, companionships, and community. Nye illustrates that embracing and working through sorrow is the path to genuinely embodying kindness, a virtue of utmost importance in our world, which has become more and more polarized. Importantly, kindness is important not only as a salve for sorrow and pain but also for other reasons that contribute to personal growth; social cohesion; and such overall goals of higher education as emotional well-being, empathy and understanding, ethical and moral development, collaborative learning, and workforce preparation (Brodrick).Inspired by Nye's exploration of the relationship between sorrow and kindness, I want to consider how higher education can integrate kindness and sorrow into teaching and learning to create a healthier, more responsive, and more humane environment for our students and colleagues. Here I offer a few suggestions:

1.**Embed emotional literacy into the curriculum.** Integrate lessons on emotional literacy into your courses. This could involve discussions about the impact of emotions on learning (Imad, 2022b) as well as assignments that encourage students to reflect on and communicate about their own experiences with sorrow and how it influences their perspective on various topics.

2. **Facilitate empathy-building activities.** Create assignments that require students to step into the shoes of others with different life experiences, perhaps through role-playing exercises, case studies, or literature that covers diverse emotional experiences (Abramson, 2021). This can help students develop empathy, a key component of kindness.

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3. **Promote reflective practice.** Encourage students to engage in reflective practice, such as through journaling or dialogue circles, where they can openly share and process feelings of sorrow. This can help to validate their experiences and foster a supportive classroom environment.

4. **Incorporate service learning.** Provide students with opportunities to act with kindness in real-world settings (**Torsney, 2012**). These projects can allow students to connect emotionally with the community and understand the broader social impact of their academic work.

5. **Incorporate ethical discussions.** Introduce case studies that highlight ethical dilemmas that professionals in the field face, prompting students to consider the sorrow and suffering that can result from discovery and advancements and the role of kindness in shaping ethical decisions.

6. **Highlight historical context.** Teach about the human side of progress in your respective discipline by discussing the lives of notable thinkers or practitioners and the challenges they faced (**Huijgen et al., 2019**). This can humanize the field and show how sorrow, perseverance, and kindness toward oneself and others can lead to breakthroughs.

While the above list provides practical suggestions for fostering kindness and emotional understanding in the classroom, I recognize that this work goes beyond just a set of tasks. I have come to appreciate that the process of teaching empathy is inseparable from my own journey of self-reflection. Accordingly, to effectively integrate kindness and sorrow into my classes, I must engage in a lifelong journey of the heart that helps cultivate a deep and visceral understanding of my own emotions, biases, and experiences. By embarking on this personal journey, we can authentically model the empathy we aim to instill in our students. It is a meaningful cultural shift that starts within ourselves, and as educators, we have the unique opportunity and privilege to lead by example in this important endeavor.

In a world that is increasingly divisive, kindness can be tough because of fear and mistrust, social media and echo chambers, desensitization to suffering, competition and individualism, and stress and burnout. Practicing kindness can be challenging, especially when we don't have a chance to process pain, loss, and sorrow. That is, our unprocessed emotions can create barriers to our ability to empathize with and extend kindness to others. By extension, to cultivate kindness, it is essential for us to create space to process our emotions, including pain, loss, and sorrow. By acknowledging, understanding, and working through our emotions, we can develop a greater capacity for empathy and compassion, making it easier to practice kindness in our daily lives. For our students, this will make it easier to practice kindness not only within the campus community but also in their broader lives as they navigate their roles as future leaders and contributors to our society.

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