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Teaching Through Crisis: Guidance for Educators

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Overview

In times of crisis, educators play a central role in guiding students through challenging conversations with sensitivity and resilience. *Teaching Through Crisis* is a comprehensive resource designed to equip educators with tools and strategies necessary to navigate complex classroom discussions, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. This document addresses key themes, including the creation of enabling conditions, immediate practices for responding to crises, and methods for repairing harm and restoring relationships post-discussion.

Purpose

The purpose of this guidance is multifaceted:

- It aims to empower educators to **create a classroom atmosphere conducive to navigating crises**, cultivating what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned as the “Beloved Community.”
- It provides **practical insights and practices for helping teachers navigate the aftermath of events** involving tragedy or injustice in real time, ensuring educators can respond with care and empathy.
- Finally, it delves into the **vital process of repairing harm and restoring relationships after challenging discussions**, promoting healing and resilience within the educational community.

As we embark on this journey together, *Teaching Through Crisis* serves as a valuable tool for educators committed to fostering not only academic growth but also the emotional and social well-being of their students.

Building the Beloved Community: Enabling Conditions for Teaching in Crisis

In her invaluable book, *Teaching on Days After: Educating for Equity in the Wake of Injustice* (2021), Alyssa Hadley Dunn writes, “Teaching on days after only works if you’ve been teaching for justice on days before and days during.” In the wake of a crisis, we cannot expect students to suddenly feel comfortable talking about fraught topics unless we have already taken care to build a supportive classroom community, build relationships, and attend to students’ social-emotional needs. The following resource from *Facing History and Ourselves* can help you create a classroom community that is capable of discussing and processing fraught topics in a productive, empathetic way.



Facing History and Ourselves is an educational organization dedicated to engaging students in critical thinking about history, ethics, and human behavior. They offer comprehensive guidance and resources to help educators create inclusive and empathetic classroom environments while navigating challenging topics like prejudice, racism, and historical events including tragedies like school shootings, wars, and natural disasters.

Back to School: Building a Classroom Community—A Toolkit from Facing History and Ourselves

It's often said, "The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago; the second-best time is now." Likewise, the best time to build a classroom community is at the beginning of the year; the second best time is right now. **While this toolkit is designed to help you "lay a foundation of community and care as you welcome students into the classroom," you can also use it to build community right now.**

Establishing the groundwork for an environment conducive to students freely expressing their

thoughts and ideas not only enhances their academic success but also establishes a supportive base to tackle challenges and disruptions that may emerge throughout the school term.

The **Back to School: Building a Classroom Community Toolkit** is structured in three parts:

- 1. The first section presents preparatory steps aimed at readying yourself** for a new term or teaching a new class. This involves reflection prompts and strategies emphasizing self-reflection, prioritizing relationships and compassion in teaching, and placing importance on self-care.
- 2. The second section** presents activities designed to assist students in **fostering comfort** within the classroom, **nurturing relationships** between students and with the instructor, and **cultivating a sense of community** within the class.
- 3. The final section** details **opening and closing routines** for classroom use. These routines serve as pivotal tools in establishing tranquility, consistency, and predictability, particularly when transitioning between in-person and remote learning settings.

“The Day After:” Some Practices for Responding to Crisis in the Classroom

Teaching in the aftermath of a crisis is remarkably challenging, as educators are forced to reckon with their own raw and complex emotions while attending to the multiple and diverse needs of their students in uncertain and shifting contexts.

Given how overwhelming teaching can feel in the days and weeks after a crisis—or amidst a series of ongoing and cascading crises—here are some practices educators might consider to help make it feel a little more manageable. Overarchingly, the goal of the practices below are to ensure that educators and students alike feel safe, supported, and cared for as they navigate the uneven terrain of “the day after.”



Take care of your needs.

Recognizing our own humanity as educators is critical to best supporting students in times of crisis. It's difficult to meaningfully support others when our own needs haven't yet been met and our feelings about the events haven't been fully addressed.

When educators share vulnerability with their village following tragedy, they will be better equipped to support students. It's okay not to know, it's okay to have mixed emotions, and it's okay to ask for support when needed. The urgency educators often feel to support students can compel them to forgo meeting their own needs. As students look to educators as models for navigating tough times, successfully navigating our own needs and emotions can provide powerful frameworks for students to do the same.

In the understandable rush to support students following a tragedy, educators can sometimes feel like they're “the only one” that can help (Venet, 2021), but, unchecked, this urge can lead to more harm. **On the “day after,” students don't need a singular hero, but they do need to enter a community of caring adults committed to supporting them in trauma-informed ways.**

Schools should invest in building trauma-informed communities of care prior to crisis, so that no educator bears the emotional burden of being “the only one.” Investing in communities of care—with the partnership of students and caregivers—prior to the onset of a crisis reduces the emotional labor for teachers and increases the chances that every student's needs can be met by someone in the building.





Do something.

One typical response to a crisis, especially when it feels so big, complex, and overwhelming, is to try to ignore it, opting for silence or a “business as usual” approach. For instance, diving right into the planned lesson might seem like the best way to move forward. However, the world inside of the classroom is directly impacted by what happens outside of it, and students’ minds will be occupied with the crisis whether we acknowledge it or not (“Handle With Care,” 2023).

Students, in general, report feeling gratitude toward educators willing to acknowledge the crisis and tragedy, even in the smallest ways (Huston & DiPietro, 2007). Small acts, such as asking students how they are, offering a period for quiet reflection, or supporting them in writing to begin processing and healing (Venet, 2021), allow educators to hold space that acknowledges the reality of “the day after” without compelling students to share their feelings before they’re ready. Educators can reflect and write

alongside students, as students often look to educators as models, especially in times of uncertainty.

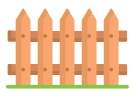


Focus on relationships.

The ability to navigate crises safely with students depends on the strength of the relationships that have been built and maintained throughout the course of the school year. On “the day after,” students are not looking for their teachers to know everything or to tell them what will happen next, but, instead, they are seeking stability from a trusted member of their community.

Sometimes, educators may feel an urgency to intellectualize the tragedy (Venet, 2021). Building assignments and lesson plans around a crisis, especially a crisis that students haven’t fully understood or processed, can jeopardize the safety and stability they’re seeking. There will be a time when questions about the tragedy will surface and can be discussed, but the “day after” is a time for “less prep, more presence” (brown, 2018), as students need opportunities to process and connect.

It’s critical to lean into restorative approaches that center the social and emotional needs of students over acts of academic compliance in the aftermath of a crisis. Serving the social-emotional needs of students largely centers on educators choosing to listen to students and their needs without judgment or evaluation (Wolter, 2021). Normalizing students’ feelings can both destigmatize the need for additional mental health support and open up possibilities for future healing (Schuyler, 2023).



Set and respect boundaries.

Boundaries are critical for the social-emotional health of educators and students alike. **During times of crisis, boundaries are as critical as ever, as it's easy to be deluged by the constant churning of the news cycle and continuous reminders of the tragedy.**

One boundary educators might consider in the aftermath of a crisis is **limiting screen time access** (“Handle With Care,” 2023). It may be tempting to have the news on in the classroom, but networks may show graphic images or videos that we may not have the capacity to help students understand or navigate. Networks may also, on occasion, rush to report information that isn't fully true, which may create hardships for students. In almost all cases, students don't need to see graphic images or videos to be aware of the magnitude of a crisis.

Being attuned to the tragedy and acknowledging its impact does not have to involve continuous information access. Educators that decide to invite real-time news network coverage into their learning spaces should have a plan to help students navigate the

images and information they receive safely, ethically, and responsibly.

Some educators may feel comfortable allowing students to talk freely about their thoughts and feelings following a tragedy. Educators with strong discourse communities likely already have norms and boundaries that guide discussion in their classrooms and clear strategies for responding to harm, but if that work hasn't taken root yet in a classroom setting, educators offering space for discussion should **establish clear guardrails to guide the conversation** and reduce opportunities for harm. Boundaries might include providing students with guiding questions, offering them some talk stems, and building structures for equitable participation, including creating backchannels for students who might not want to share their feelings with a whole group and allowing students to opt-out of participating at all (Chaitlin, 2023).

While students are grateful for educators' willingness to acknowledge crises, they also aren't interested in being deluged by crises for the entirety of the school day. Educators engaging students in dialogue might also elect to set boundaries around the duration of the discussion so as not to overwhelm students (Venet, 2021). Without boundaries around discussion, students can experience a high cognitive load, as they both take in information from others and wrestle with their own thoughts and feelings.





Center hope.

One common response to a crisis, especially in the days after, is a sense of hopelessness, as the people, places, values, and orientations that provide safety and security are under threat. Hopelessness can manifest itself in many ways—sadness, anger, total withdrawal—and it can be dangerous. Centering hope is one of the most important actions educators can take in times of crisis.

When centering hope, the goal is not to minimize, invalidate, or stigmatize anyone’s feelings about the crisis or to say things that might not be demonstrably true (e.g., “this will be over soon”), but it does include helping students remember their purpose and to consider possibilities beyond the immediate moment. **Helping students understand that possibilities for change, transformation, repair, and healing remain possible—even in the face of tragedy—is critical** (Kaba, 2021).

Repairing Harm, Restoring Relationships

Healthy classroom communities expect and make space for generative conflict. Generative conflict, or principled struggle, “occurs when we’re struggling for the sake of something larger than ourselves and are honest and direct while holding compassion” (Lee, 2021). **Normalizing generative conflict and understanding how to engage in it can make harm less possible in our communities and schools, as educators and students have developed meaningful tools to navigate and resolve conflict.**

However, in times of heightened emotions, such as the aftermath of a crisis, it is possible for conflict to move from generative to harmful even in the most conflict-adept spaces, particularly as students share raw reactions to tragic events that are big, unwieldy and difficult to comprehend. As healthy classroom communities make space for generative conflict, they will often have strategies, usually rooted in restorative practice, to holistically address and heal from harm

without resorting to punitive, exclusionary measures (Kaba, 2021). **Restorative and transformative approaches place value on working through a process that isn’t rooted in punishment, but collective healing instead.** As Stallings (2022) reminds us, all tools can’t be weapons.

If a school or classroom hasn’t yet invested in restorative or transformative systems and practices, it is best to do so prior to a crisis, as it can be difficult to build structures to address crisis in the midst of crisis. If these systems and structures are in place in a school or district, educators can rely on them rather than attempting to develop their own systems in the aftermath of tragedy.

It’s important to note that the harm discussed in this section doesn’t necessarily include threats to physical safety, which will require intervention from outside the classroom community. The harms discussed here might include a student saying something repugnant in a discussion of the crisis, a student minimizing, invalidating, or mocking another student’s identities, experiences, or feelings, or perhaps someone losing their temper as they navigate through the trauma of the crisis.



Mingus (2019) developed a **four-pronged approach to apologizing and repairing harm** that may serve as a template for educators and students seeking to repair the classroom community following a harmful incident: **self-reflection, apology, repair, and changed behavior**. While Mingus’s work can be beneficial in establishing frameworks for accountability and healing even in the absence of more robust restorative and transformative approaches, it functions best when paired with the proactive systems work discussed previously in this section.

Self-Reflection

There is often an understandable push to punish those who have harmed, which can involve students being removed from the classroom or school. However, in general, those who might have harmed in the ways being discussed here will eventually need to be meaningfully and holistically reintegrated into the classroom community. Students who are suspended are three times more likely to drop out by tenth grade (Kaba & Meiners, 2014).

A more productive approach—one that can lead to future healing and transformed behavior—is enabling those who have done harm to take accountability for their damaging actions, which may include helping them to **reflect on why others were harmed by their words or behaviors**. This is not intended to absolve the student of their actions or minimize the impact to the person harmed, but it does make future healing and changes in behavior more possible. Supporting a student with taking accountability is a powerful lesson that is as transferable as any academic skill.

A student may not fully realize that a term they used to describe a group of people is harmful to members of that community, but they may reconsider future actions if they have an opportunity to learn about the word’s origins and history and consider how it caused harm to that community, possibly including their classmates. Apologies that occur without self-reflection and accountability-taking can often be insincere or incomplete.

Apology

Apologizing is an opportunity for the person who committed the harm to build the “trust infrastructure” necessary to begin the repair process with those they harmed. Mingus reminds that depending on the harm, there may need to be more than one apology.

While apologies don’t have any specific form—there’s no single standard for apologizing—they should, in general, move beyond vague platitudes (e.g., “I’m sorry”) to specific acknowledgement of the harm caused and its associated impact. This is a primary opportunity for the results of the self-reflection to be shared with those most affected by the harmful action.

While apologies are acts of vulnerability, they are not intended to be humiliating or shaming, and, in general, demands for apologies don’t typically work to set the stage for reparation (brown, 2021). This is an important reframe for our classrooms, as apologies are often used as ways to publicly “call out” students who have committed harm, but the more powerful reason to have students apologize after self-reflection is to begin to build the trust and vulnerability needed to heal both those who have been harmed and the broader community.

It’s less important that the student who used the offensive term is publicly called out than it is for those harmed to have support and for the community to begin the process of reparation. Apologies can’t be reduced to acts of retribution; they are opportunities for school and classroom communities to move closer to their shared values.

Repair

During the repair phase, both the person who has harmed and those who have been harmed must work collaboratively to rebuild and restore the relationships that are at the center of the “beloved community.” In addition to the interpersonal restoration that takes place during this phase, it’s important to interrogate systems and assess how to reduce future possibilities for harm.

Repair and restoration will often take time, but the results can be transformative both to the individuals and systems involved in the process. Again, the goal of repair is not only to heal the current harm and bring members of the classroom community back into relationship, but to ensure that, longer term, they are more likely to remain in relationship. It is here that the real work of healing can begin.

Changed Behavior

Moving through this process will hopefully result in changed behavior, at individual, community, and systems levels. However, sustained changes in behavior are often difficult, especially in the traumatic aftermath of a crisis, but even small shifts away from harm can have large, lasting positive impacts on our classroom and school communities.

For the student who used an offensive term, they can have room and space to demonstrate a sustained commitment to repairing and maintaining the “beloved community” and to rebuild the relationships with their classmates by demonstrating greater knowledge, respect, and care for those around them. Both the students’ movement through this process and the “beloved community’s” openness to restoration and transformation can serve as powerful models for resisting the urge for punitive punishment, engaging in healing practices, and, ultimately, building schools and classrooms where harm is less possible.

It is important to remember, especially in times of crisis, that perfection is not the standard and that there is no singular way to handle harm when it occurs. Having the systems and structures in place ahead of a crisis can be beneficial, but issues, struggles, and unclarity will remain. **Being generous with oneself and with others,** especially in the immediate aftermath of tragedy and crisis, is critical for educator, student, and community well being.



Resources for Teaching in the Wake of Crises

Mini-Lessons & Tips

Teaching in the Wake of Violence (Facing History and Ourselves) This Teaching Idea is a guide for teachers to navigate conversations with their students after news of a mass shooting, terrorist attack, or other violent event.

Talking with Students About Shocking or Disturbing News (Common Sense Media) This resource offers some considerations for helping students process upsetting news.

Head, Heart, Conscience (Facing History and Ourselves) This strategy can be particularly useful for an initial discussion of complex and emotional current events and to help students clarify their relationship to and their perspective on the event.

When Bad Things Are Happening (Learning for Justice) When news breaks of disaster or violence, your students may want to discuss a crisis as it unfolds. Listen, Protect, Model, Take Care of Yourself.

Fostering Civil Discourse: How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter? (Facing History and Ourselves) The ideas and tools in this resource are designed to help you prepare your students to engage in civil discourse, whether you are teaching in-person, remotely, or transitioning between the two.

Resources for Continued Learning

General Support for Crises

Handle with Care: Supporting Young People During Crises (Learning for Justice)

Let's Talk!: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students (Learning for Justice)

Fostering Civil Discourse: How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter? (Facing History & Ourselves)

12 Ways to Help Students Identify Their Feelings (Edutopia)

Toolbox for Care (Facing History and Ourselves) This teaching strategy invites students to think about the "tools" they have access to that can help them take care of themselves and their community in the wake of traumatic news.

Approaching News & Images

11 Tips for Protecting Yourself from Upsetting Images (Great Good)

How to Talk to Kids About Violence, Crime, and War (Common Sense Media)

News and Media Literacy Practices

Current Events in the Classroom (Facing History and Ourselves) Classroom resources for making connections between current events and your curriculum, including activities and discussion strategies for high school and middle school students.

The Breaking News Consumer Handbook (On The Media)

Navigating Digital Information (Crash Course + Stanford History Education Group)

News Literacy Project: Resources for Educators

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