

Multiple perspectives on an innovative example of collaborating with students in an online course to meet their needs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Katherine Seibel, Nicole Wong, Nykchasia Scott, and Matthea Marquart
Columbia University School of Social Work's Online Campus

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Abstract: In this session, a team from Columbia University's School of Social Work (CSSW) will share how they approached making changes to their Spring 2020 online course in response to the COVID-19 pandemic using trauma-informed teaching strategies, including collaborating with students on adjustments to course assignments and grading. The presenters, representing the instructor, TA, technical support, and student perspectives, will share recommendations for instructional designers and faculty looking for ways to incorporate opportunities to collaborate with students in online courses.

Discussion questions:

- Who would like to share an example you've experienced of collaborating with students in a course? This could be as a student, as part of the instructional team, as an instructional designer, as a guest speaker, etc.
- Have you experienced an example of collaborating with students on adjusting course assignments or grading? If yes, what worked / didn't work?
- What are some examples of concrete things you've done, or your institution has done, to meet student needs in online courses during the pandemic?
- What else would you like to discuss?




Context of our course:

- Synchronous online course on Fundraising and Development, for Master of Science in Social Work students at [Columbia University](#)
- 7-week course that started at the beginning of March 2020, prior to the WHO's [March 11th](#) declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, and concluded at the end of April 2020
- The instructional team wanted to implement [trauma-informed teaching and learning principles](#)
- The instructional team adapted to the University's decision to implement pass/fail grading by creating a proposal for students to discuss, regarding assignment requirements and course grading

Where to learn more about our experience in this course:

- Article in the Teaching & Learning in Social Work Blog, Hitchcock, L. (Ed.): [Fostering a spirit of collaboration with Social Work Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- Narrated poster for the 2020 UPCEA Mid-Atlantic conference, available in the CORE Library. Go to UPCEA CORE > Open Forum > View Library > UPCEA Open Forum > 2020 Regional Conference Presentation Recordings > [Mid-Atlantic Region Folder](#)
- Chapter in the upcoming book: Carello, J. & Thompson, P. (Eds.) *Lessons from the Pandemic: Trauma-Informed Approaches to College, Crisis, Change*



Perspectives	What would you like instructional designers and faculty to know about your perspective on this experience?	What recommendations do you have for instructional designers and faculty looking for ways to incorporate opportunities to collaborate with students in online courses?
<p>Student perspective: Nykchasia Scott (CSSW '20), LinkedIn, Website</p> 	<p>I honor the mantra, "Everyone's an expert in their own life". I take that empowering approach into my social work practice and all life spaces. To experience an instructional team that honored my expertise as a student, while prioritizing the wellness and capacity of the collective, was a defining moment in my academic career. They modeled the art of collaboration while leading mindfully. In my observation, trauma-informed teaching strategies are generally applied individually. Their investment in making changes to the course was intentionally designed and displayed community care. During the live class session, the process felt authentic as they led the discussion without a predetermined outcome. Overall, I appreciate how thorough the instructional team was in reviewing the syllabus to explore changes to the assignments and grading rubrics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The collaboration process does not have to be complicated, just invite your students into it. • Power dynamics can hinder productivity so let the ego go and lean into the process of cultivating change by allowing a free flowing conversation to take place. • Don't short change the process, meaning allocate an extended amount of time for discussion before moving into other action items for the class session. • Take your time to intentionally build the community in the online course. That can be as simple as weekly check-ins. • Challenge your ability to adapt to change, be whimsical, be well, but also be mindful. • Incorporate healing- centered engagements into your class session. Even one minute of intentional breathing or guided breathwork can have a tremendous impact on improving overall wellness for you and your students.
<p>Technical support perspective: Nicole Wong (CSSW '19), LinkedIn</p> 	<p>In the spirit of collaboration, it was refreshing to be a part of an instructional team that was so dedicated to trauma-informed teaching strategies and ensuring that we engaged with our students as individuals surviving a pandemic first and students receiving grades second. These approaches were hopefully felt by our students, which allowed honest conversations to take place about our students' capacities, their limits, and their own expectations for the course. Not only was this a valuable process in our course to prioritize our students' well-being and their goals for the course, it also embodied one of our core values of social work in practice, the dignity and worth of the person.</p>	<p>In this period of time where we are so heavily reliant on technology, use the technology we have to your advantage! While changes to the technology may be daunting, especially if you're also making changes to the course design, think critically and creatively about the ways in which our technology may be able to solve some of the challenges that may be coming up. If you're asking students for their feedback, can you incorporate an anonymous poll into your course so that everyone can contribute freely? Can you ensure to use the chat box more in class, so that students who prefer to take a step back verbally also have an opportunity to participate? In addition, if you elect to utilize some trauma informed strategies of allowing students to leave their webcams off during class, call into class from their phones, or watch the recording after a live session, incorporate engagement into your coursework that doesn't rely on the typical measures we are used to. Rather, ask them how they might feel best able to engage, and they'll likely appreciate your flexibility and understanding while also remaining engaged in your course content.</p>
<p>TA perspective: Katherine Seibel (CSSW '19)</p>	<p>As a teaching associate, I was extremely grateful and energized to be able to work with an instructional team that truly led with a spirit of collaboration with inherent respect and use of a trauma-informed perspective for each other and the students; something that was deeply vital in the face of the global pandemic. Building a relationship with the instructional team with these characteristics as cornerstones made for feeling supported throughout the course and confidence in the ability to adapt and make changes. I also believe that this dynamic translated to our practices during each class and helped us to connect with the students and offer support that could be meaningful to what they each needed to find success in the course and meet their learning goals. I was also entirely grateful for the students' expression in letting us know what they needed and that helped to strengthen our collaboration together through the course.</p>	<p>I would recommend reaching out to others in your teaching network to share what you are experiencing and learn from others' strategies. I would also proactively look for ways to proactively seek the students' feedback, responses, and suggestions and look to meaningfully incorporate what you learn from the students. Students are the experts in their own experiences; recognizing and supporting this is a huge asset to designing a course. Finally, I would uphold a trauma-informed perspective, and take time to learn a variety of strategies to put this perspective to practice. We are all people with a variety of needs and different experiences; learning remotely or virtually, especially in our current climate, can bring up different responses and so this is something that can be really helpful to be mindful of.</p>
<p>Instructor: Matthea Marquart (CSSW '05), LinkedIn, Twitter, Website</p> 	<p>Taking a collaborative approach was essential, both within the instructional team and with the full course community, including the students. The instructional team collaborated on a proposal for changes to the course, which we introduced to the students as a starting point for a class discussion. The class's collaboration in the discussion provided essential insight into how we could support students in achieving the course learning goals in a compassionate and realistic way; everyone had expertise about their own lives and needs.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Trust that students know what works for them, and provide avenues for them to share that knowledge, e.g. polls, class discussion, breakout groups that report back, asynchronous options. 2) Collaborate with a team that has different perspectives, to help balance out biases and gaps. If your institution doesn't provide instructional teams, there may be resources such as dedicated faculty support administrators or a Center for Teaching and Learning, and professional associations like UPCEA are also valuable resources.