

A Collection of Teaching Advice: Teaching through the Pandemic

Reach out and chat: A critical case for virtual community-care and adjourning

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Forming community, maintaining relationships, and adjourning is essential for successful group interactions and for students to acknowledge their peers' contributions to their personal and professional development once their time in the class comes to an end. This teaching brief describes the process and results of adapting a "Reach Out and Touch" activity I facilitated prior to pandemic times into its virtual version called "Reach Out and Chat".

Teaching and learning context

The context I worked to navigate was centered in an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion course for 13 masters-level Student Affairs graduate students. The purpose of the course is to critically reflect, analyze, and integrate equity, justice, diversity, and inclusion research and advocacy in Student Affairs practice. During the pandemic, the central challenge was to facilitate student adjourning, appreciation, and acknowledgement of each other in the service of community care, with the inherent barriers of virtual instruction. As bell hooks (1994) states "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the *souls* of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply, and intimately begin" (p.13 emphasis added). Further, adjourning, as articulated by Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) stages of group development, is an imperative for the health of productive and synergistic groups. To this end I needed to find an acceptable way to adjourn within the bounds of the COVID-19 safety restrictions.

Applied teaching strategy: Adapting "Reach Out and Touch" to "Reach Out and Chat"

Ordinarily, to address the adjourning stage of this course in the service of sustaining community, I facilitate a face-to-face activity called "Reach Out and Touch" (George Mason University Leadership Education and Development, n.d.). During the activity, students take turns either tapping the shoulders of their peers or having their shoulders tapped. As tappers, students navigate the room and tap classmates (who are seated with their eyes closed) based on a statement read aloud by the instructor facilitator. For example, "Reach out and touch someone you have learned something from this semester" or "Reach out and touch someone you admire". After several questions, students switch roles, and the cycle continues.

The tapped students remain seated, bow their heads, and close their eyes, so they never know who is doing the tapping. However, they know that every time they receive a tap it is representative of a classmate they have impacted in positive and profound ways. We complete the exercise in silence with inspirational/positive music playing in the background. The facilitator is the only speaker who reads the statements during the exercise.

With the restrictions of COVID-19 this activity was all but impossible, but I was determined to alter it to re-create a context of shared community and appreciation. Therefore, I modified the activity for use in the Zoom platform, specifically through the chat feature. I explained what the exercise was, the rationale for the exercise, and amended the instructions as follows:

1. I will show a slide that includes various statements.
2. Students should then privately message any classmates to which the statement applies, in their view. For example, “Someone you are glad came to this program/ISU” would display, then students would privately chat that person to say something like “you”, “thanks for being here” or even a simple “!!!” and the receiving student would be notified.

I would then advance the slide to a new message, and we would continue for 30-60 minutes, depending on energy and engagement. This time allows students to 1) read their received messages and 2) message multiple students the statement applies to, if they wish. The biggest change from the in-person approach is the removal of mystery/anonymity. However, through private chat, students can share without the pressure of an audience.

Why this strategy worked

As a faculty member who teaches and conducts research on topics related to equity and justice, the role of building brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and trust within the classroom environment cannot be understated. My pedagogical approach is to offer realistic and, at times, sobering views to students about the realities of oppression and injustice, without leaving them with dread or despair about how to move forward in making a difference. Part of this process includes adjourning as a community.

Adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) is an important part of group process to help address any sadness, regret. The stage serves as a type of ceremonial acknowledgement of the work of the group and also, in my experience, helps to promote and sustain community engagement within and among students across time. Within the context of COVID-19, students have been challenged in difficult ways (Stewart, 2020) including community-building – in and out of class – and working to address the socio-emotional aspects of the group has been even more difficult. This intervention addresses this prominent need.

Key takeaways

The students articulated they desperately needed this activity, it was a breath of fresh air, and it felt like a virtual hug. With their permission, I saved the chat from the class session. Below, I share one small section of an extensive transcript that demonstrates the appreciation and love the students had for each other. I redacted names, but it illustrates their reactions to the powerful exercise.

For context, when a message was displayed during the activity that a student believed applied to the whole class they chatted @everyone in the chat box thus making it public. They decided to break the “rules” to do this, but their action also conveys the ways they were caught up in the moment of appreciating and being appreciated.

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From [REDACTED]: So thankful for you all!
From [REDACTED]: cannot imagine this program without all of y'all
From [REDACTED]: Big love omg <3
From [REDACTED] y'all. this is it <3
From [REDACTED] (He/Him) : (づ。o。o。)づ have this hug
From [REDACTED]: Yes
From [REDACTED]: ^^^
From [REDACTED] I usually fear stuff like this because I never see the impact I make on other- Thank you. I feel so valued
From TJ Stewart (he/him) : crying in the club!
From [REDACTED] (He/Him) : ^^^^^
From [REDACTED]: ^^^
From [REDACTED]: retweet
From [REDACTED]: Agreed
From [REDACTED]: *thumb up emoji*
From [REDACTED]: Totally felt the same!

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Figure 1: A small section of an extensive Zoom chat transcript that demonstrates the appreciation and love the students had for each other.

Additional context for this strategy

I believe this strategy would work well in virtual/synchronous classes of approximately 30 students or less. Beyond 30 students, breakout rooms with a TA or another facilitator might be beneficial. Additionally, in classes with a cohort model, or where there may be multiple courses that students take together, this activity might be helpful in establishing and/or maintaining community connection through virtual appreciation and community care over time. Further, this exercise would work at any stage of a cohort process but works best pedagogically toward the end of a class after some rapport has been established (where students are able to adequately be in reflection on how their classmates meet or do not meet the statements in the slides). I facilitated the in-person version of this exercise to both undergraduate and graduate student classes and believe this alteration would work on both levels.

References

- Arao, B. & Clemens, K. (2013) From safe spaces to brave spaces: A new way to frame dialogue around diversity and social justice. In L. M. Landerman (Ed) *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. Stylus.
- George Mason University Leadership Education and Development (n.d.) Reach out and touch someone. Retrieved from <https://lead.gmu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Reach-Out-and-Touch-Someone.pdf>
- hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*. Routledge.
- Stewart, T. J. (2020) Capitalism and the (il)logics of Higher Education's COVID-19 response: A Black feminist critique. *Leisure Sciences*. DOI: [10.1080/01490400.2020.1774011](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1774011)
- Tuckman, B. W., & Jensen, M. A. (1977). Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group & Organization Studies*, 2(4), 419–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105960117700200404>
- For instructions, sample statements, and sample songs for a playlist I have created a google folder: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wUqPkWgQpN5Bh2ckefXfgZfFKkMck86VX99Gw8ZNOqM/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix A: Sample statements for “Reach Out and Chat”

1. Someone who makes you laugh
2. Someone who has taught you something important in this class
3. Someone you respect
4. Someone who is a good listener
5. Someone who has helped you
6. Someone you can depend on
7. Someone who you believe has something special to offer
8. Someone who has made you want to try harder
9. Someone who has inspired you
10. Someone you feel supported by
11. Someone who you are glad was in the class
12. Someone who has challenged you
13. Someone who you appreciate
14. Someone you would like to get to know better
15. Someone who is creative
16. Someone with good ideas
17. Someone who is reliable
18. Someone you believe in
19. Someone who has made you feel valued
20. Someone who matters

Appendix B: Instructions for “Reach Out and Chat”

The purpose of this activity is to engage in the process of adjourning class and as a means to practice community care in the service of wellness, community-building, and connection. This exercise will give you an opportunity to appreciate your classmates and be appreciated.

Instructions

I will begin playing music and at that time all students should mute their microphones and remain muted/silent for the duration of the exercise. I will then display a statement such as “Someone you respect” and will repeat the words “Reach out and chat someone you respect” at that time you should use the chat feature and privately message any classmate that fulfills or meets that statement to you. You can write a brief message, or simply send a symbol with no explanation such as an exclamation mark (!) that signals to the person you are messaging that you respect them.

Each slide will remain up for a couple of minutes to allow you to 1) message multiple classmates if you wish 2) read and respond to your own messages if you wish, and 3) reflect on the messages you have received. After a few minutes have passed I will write @everyone in the chat box that we are moving on to the next slide/statement and we will repeat the exercise for several rounds. At the conclusion of the exercise, we will debrief and specifically discuss the connection to the importance of self-care, community care, and their relationships to community-building and equity and justice work broadly.

Wrap up by offering some time for reflection and questions about the activity focusing on the socio-emotional feelings it invokes and connecting to class objectives as appropriate.

Songs

There are two ways to approach the curation of the songs to be played during the exercise. The first is to solicit recommendations from students. Without revealing what the exercise will be ask them for songs that are uplifting and inspiring or songs that make them feel appreciated and reflective. Then create a list on a platform of your choosing (YouTube, Apple Music, Spotify, etc.). Ensure what when you share your screen for the activity you click any setting that will optimize for sharing audio.

The second approach is to simply create a list based on songs you select. I usually go this route but try to have a variety of feel good songs with inspirational melodies that invoke warm and reflective vibes. Examples of songs on my list are

- XO - Beyonce
- Drops of Jupiter - Train
- Up (Live) - Jason Mraz
- Oh, Maker - Janelle Monáe
- Silver & Gold - Musiq Soulchile
- Honeymoon Avenue - Ariana Grande
- Can't Take My Eyes Off of You - Lauryn Hill
- Thinking Out Loud - Ed Sheeran
- Have it All - Jason Mraz