Modeling and Encouraging Self-Care in Online Teacher Preparation: Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts for both teachers and students at all levels. Instructional delivery had to be modified to respond to the need for social distancing. Even courses that were already fully online required adaptations to accommodate the needs of university students during COVID. One of the biggest changes that the authors made to their teaching and to their students' learning was that of modeling and encouraging self-care. This article summarizes what two university faculty changed in their instruction to help promote self-care, as well as what they are doing now to continue utilizing what they learned.

Keywords*:* self-care, online teaching, online learning, teacher preparation

Introduction

We remember it like it was yesterday. The email that changed our perspective on life and school. "School is shutting down while we prepare to move courses to an online learning format." Both authors remember thinking to themselves that it was no big deal; we already teach all of our courses online, so this will be a piece of cake. While we watched many of our fellow colleagues struggle with transitioning to an online format, we continued teaching like we always did. We had always followed the Universal Design for Learning framework to ensure our students were engaged in their learning and focused on building and sustaining relationships with each of our students. However, what we learned in the coming weeks was that engagement was not going to be enough. Our students needed more, and we needed more. This practitioner reflection article will provide the reader with a variety of ways the authors made changes to their online courses to help teach and model self-care during a crisis. With the pandemic being over,

we are still noticing that our students, and ourselves, are struggling. The ideas in this article can still be used today for both K-12 practioners as well as higher education professionals.

Teacher Burnout

Research, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, tells us that there is a great amount of teacher burnout for special educators (Brunsting et al., 2014) and that this burnout is the cause of many teachers leaving the profession (Rasanen et al., 2022). Similarly, burnout is common among higher education faculty (Jaremka et al, 2020; Khan et al., 2019; Sabagh et al., 2018). Characteristics of burnout include: (a) exhaustion, (b) mental distancing or negativity in the workplace, and (c) reduced professional efficacy (World Health Organization, 2019). While many educators were already affected both mentally and physically by burnout, the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated the problem (Abramson, 2022; Gewin, 2021; Shin et al., 2013).

With burnout comes the need for educators to practice self-care. The use of evidence-based self-care strategies has been identified in the literature (e.g. Pietarinen et al., 2013). One effective strategy is to ask for assistance when needed instead of attempting to complete all required work-life tasks alone (Pietarinen et al., 2013; Tikkanen et al., 2022). Building and maintaining positive relationships with colleagues is another way to take care of yourself (Boren, 2013), while another strategy is to set clear boundaries that include scheduled work times and being diligent in maintaining those boundaries (Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021).

Implementing Self-Care in An Online Course

Both authors teach in fully online asynchronous graduate teacher education programs, where the majority of students work in PK-12 schools during the day, are parents of young children, and do coursework at night or on the weekends. The majority of the coursework is asynchronous, but the authors do offer online virtual meetings where students meet at a specified

day and time to hear a lecture and/or information on the week's assignments. The meetings continued throughout the pandemic and were still well attended, but the stress from the students was apparent. Students came to class with less smiling, less interaction, and even less engagement. The number of questions received in these meetings, as well as through email, were at an all-time high. The questions students were asking and the work they were turning in were drastically different than we experienced in previous semesters. The authors spoke regularly before the pandemic but spoke almost daily throughout the pandemic to try and brainstorm ways to help alleviate some of the pressures the students were feeling, while still maintaining high standards and ensuring students learned the required content.

Research finds it is important to ask for help when needed, instead of trying to complete all required work tasks (Pietarinen et al., 2013; Tikkanen et al., 2022). The first thing we did was to decrease some of the workload the students had on the university end. One way to accomplish this was by taking the discussion board requirement away. One author remembers the relief that was seen on her students' faces, as well as the words of appreciation, removing this small requirement had on the students. Even though they did not verbally ask for assistance, we felt that a decrease in workload would help alleviate some of their stress. We also found ourselves being more lenient with due dates and talking with our students about giving themselves grace. We spoke to our students about how they needed to prioritize what was important and that if they could not fully focus on their schoolwork due to competing demands for their attention, it was okay.

Another strategy supported by research is finding ways to build and maintain positive relationships with others (Boren, 2013). Since the move to online learning in PK-12 schools was new and the authors had experience, the authors knew that this was an area we could help with.

One author provided her students time to talk during the weekly virtual meetings, as well as created a discussion board for what they were doing to get through the changes in their day jobs. This was provided to students as a place where they could go and vent or ask for ideas on how to work with their students. It was also a place that the author would share resources that she found as well as offer ideas on online strategies the students could best meet the needs of their own students in an online environment. During this time there also seemed to be an upswing in the use of student group texts on platforms such as GroupMe. This is something that many students have continued. The second author recorded videos twice per week to increase student connection to one another and the program, while also reminding students of her willingness to support them as needed. Students reported that the videos helped them feel that they were not alone (Lohmann, 2020).

Modeling Self-Care in an Online Course

The authors noticed that they themselves were starting to get more easily frustrated and irritable, which they related to the new "normal" of living during the pandemic. However, in hindsight, our stress and the stress from our students may be a result of compassion fatigue or secondary trauma. As educators, we have all been known to experience secondary trauma which is defined as "...emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). The authors definitely did not want to take these frustrations out on their students, so we decided to start modeling self-care for their students. The best way to model self-care for our students was to begin setting boundaries for when we would work. Research has found that setting clear boundaries is an effective way to take care of yourself (Barron, 2020; Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021).

From experience, the authors knew that teaching online meant working at unusual times of the day and checking in to courses at least once or twice on the weekend, if not more. The first author spoke with her students about the importance of setting boundaries and having clear schedules. She then let her students know that, for the most part, she would be logging off her computer at 6:00pm when her husband got off work and would not be answering emails late at night or on the weekends. This was to ensure she had time to decompress and not feel pressured to be readily available to her students. The second author stopped responding to emails on Sundays and made it a point to tell her students that Sundays are family days.

Conclusion

While many of the examples we provided above were reactive to help ourselves and our students cope with the realities of the pandemic, many of these are still incorporated into our courses, but now as a proactive measure. The pandemic helped us to refocus on the importance of what we are asking of our students, as well as the important role our students have in the lives of their own students. Each semester the authors look at the requirements of the course and make adjustments so that only the most necessary learning and assessment activities are included.

The authors also have found the importance of allowing students time to talk about things not related specifically to the course content and now provide time during the weekly meetings for this. For example, when one of the recent school shootings occurred, one author provided time for her students to talk to one another about their feelings, etc. to help build community. The other author invites students' children to come to the first few minutes of class to talk to one another and share their lives which has led to many discussions about spelling tests, lost teeth, and Halloween costumes.

Additionally, we find that we continue our discussion of students giving themselves grace. We have become more accommodating when students are late with assignments, but also hold a stricter late work policy when it comes to requiring documentation regarding the late work. We also check in more with our students when we notice they are struggling, which has yielded improved communication and work completion. Finally, we have continued setting personal boundaries regarding our work hours. We explain to students that work-life balance is vital for educators at all levels, early childhood through graduate school. We share examples with our students about how over-work has impacted our careers and the benefits we have seen to having balance. We are also honest with them that finding this balance is hard, but it is worth it.

As we have continued these practices, we have seen benefits for our students and for ourselves. Overall, we feel more balance in our own lives, more connected to our families, and less stressed about our work. Similarly, we have seen our students who engage in self-care often submit higher quality work in our courses, seem happier, and receive good feedback about their teaching from their school districts. While the COVID pandemic was challenging, it made us better university faculty members as it helped us understand the value of self-care for all teachers.

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