

Letter to the Editor

Conceptional framework to support vulnerable students during crisis, a real online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic

Sir,

As the WHO declared COVID-19 epidemic as a pandemic, massive disruption in the educational process all over the world has occurred.¹ Universities suspended all in-campus activities for the safety of students, faculty, employees and online learning was totally implemented to resume all educational activities.

Anxiety and worry have affected everybody because of the escalating numbers of COVID-19 outbreak cases and deaths all over the world and psychological well-being became a major concern as aggressive distancing and isolation measures have been taken for indefinite time.² As the pandemic is occurring in waves and distancing measures are still taken and moreover, the curfew measure might be resumed anytime and anyplace, emotional and social wellbeing would always be of great concern.

Definition of vulnerable student might differ from an institution to another, but all agree that attention and support are needed to those students. Vulnerability could be consistent as in cases of chronic illnesses and disabilities or emerging like family breakdown, pass away of a relative or beloved one or even the pandemics and outbreaks.

Based on a real experience with a student who unfortunately was suffering depression and grief caused by loss of a family member that was concomitant with the COVID-19 pandemic, this framework emerged. The two overwhelming circumstances accidentally happened at the beginning of the course, creating a dilemma that needed a specifically tailored approach.

In such exceptional circumstances, faculty themselves are having their own worries regarding the pandemic and the distancing and protective measures besides to the academic and administrative responsibilities. It is really difficult time for everyone, but the commitment and responsibility towards students specially struggling ones necessitate exceptional care and concern.

Conceptional framework used for offering support

Understanding

Educationalist should consider the complexity of the situation and candidate's emotional status and plan to go beyond the educational practice, not only to stick to predetermined learning objectives but also give the space

to emergent plans and outcomes. Empathy and support would be as important as the scientific value of the course.

Support and passion

Acknowledge the stressful event and student's concern and let them explicitly express their fears and worries. Show compassion to how your student feels and acknowledge those feelings and be careful about your wording to maintain positivity and enthusiasm.

Regular communications

Face to face communication would be ideal during overwhelming stressful circumstances, but because it is not possible in COVID-19 times, contact over personal phone, whatsapp and zoom or any available platform is the mean to sustain communication. Reach out if your student is not showing and finds it easier to hide. Make the first couple of communications for socializing and let your candidate talk about his/her plans and preferences. Do not mind having further non-scheduled meetings to help your candidate finalize his/her task.

Tolerance and accepting errors

Frustration is expected in crisis and shouldn't be considered as overly emotional response. Cognitive and intellectual functions would be compromised so give room for errors and accept it.

Pursue contribution and engagement

If applicable, inspire your students to relate the pandemic to the course in the form of assignment or research, the candidate would feel offering a hand in the scientific discussions related to the pandemic. Furthermore, feeling of contribution and engagement might work to minimize the fears.

Costumed strategies

People struggle many battles throughout life and respond differently to stress. For each vulnerable student, mentors and facilitators must tailor specific measures concerning both communication and education to help overcome these battles.

Avoiding deadlines

Loosening usual rules about submission deadlines at least at the course beginning would seem very helpful and probably when trust and bonding develops students would be motivated to compensate for the delay.

Praise minor achievements

Emphasize whatever your student achieves pointing to his/her strengths. Praise their literature preferences, scientific writing, presentation, addressing question and concerns and even the acceptable plagiarism incidence or whatever related to their required task.

Being a role model

Show self-control and explain any related personal experience, this would help your candidate to acquire similar attitude.

Allocating time for reflection

Allocate time at the beginning of each communication for your student to reflect about communication and learning issues, what is good or unlikely. This would enable the experience to become more dynamic and in the favor of your student.

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