



Hope, Stress, Sketch & Kvetch: Emphasizing Caring Through Reflection in Online Teaching in the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents two reflection activities that supported the creation of community and a sense of caring for students learning in an online environment in the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first activity, students indicated how they were feeling in terms of hope/despair, stress/calm and energy level in a “check-in” slide at the beginning of each online class. This enabled the educator to respond to how the class was doing in the moment. In the second activity, students met outside of the regular class structure in an online group called “Sketch & Kvetch” to talk about how we were all doing and create a sketch that was then shared with the group. Each of these activities had a positive impact on students in the pandemic.

Key words: reflection, caring, online learning

INTRODUCTION

One thing that was abundantly clear in March, 2020, was that all students and educators would be dealing with significant stress as we navigated the complexity of an abrupt pivot to teaching/learning in an online environment amidst the uncertainty and fear of a pandemic. I captured my sense that our cognitive capacity would be severely taxed with the demands of multitasking in a sketch (Figure 1.)

In an online environment we would be missing all of the social cues of our students' being overwhelmed that a physical classroom can enable. We would be missing those informal “check-in” moments with students at the beginning and end of class. We would be missing the opportunity to show students we care about their learning by saying it through our eyes. We would be missing the chance to build community with each other. A large body of research points to the fact that “...an emotionally supportive and nonthreatening learning environment where learners feel safe and valued” is important for learning (p. 6, National Academies.) Reflection activities are one way to help students add meaning

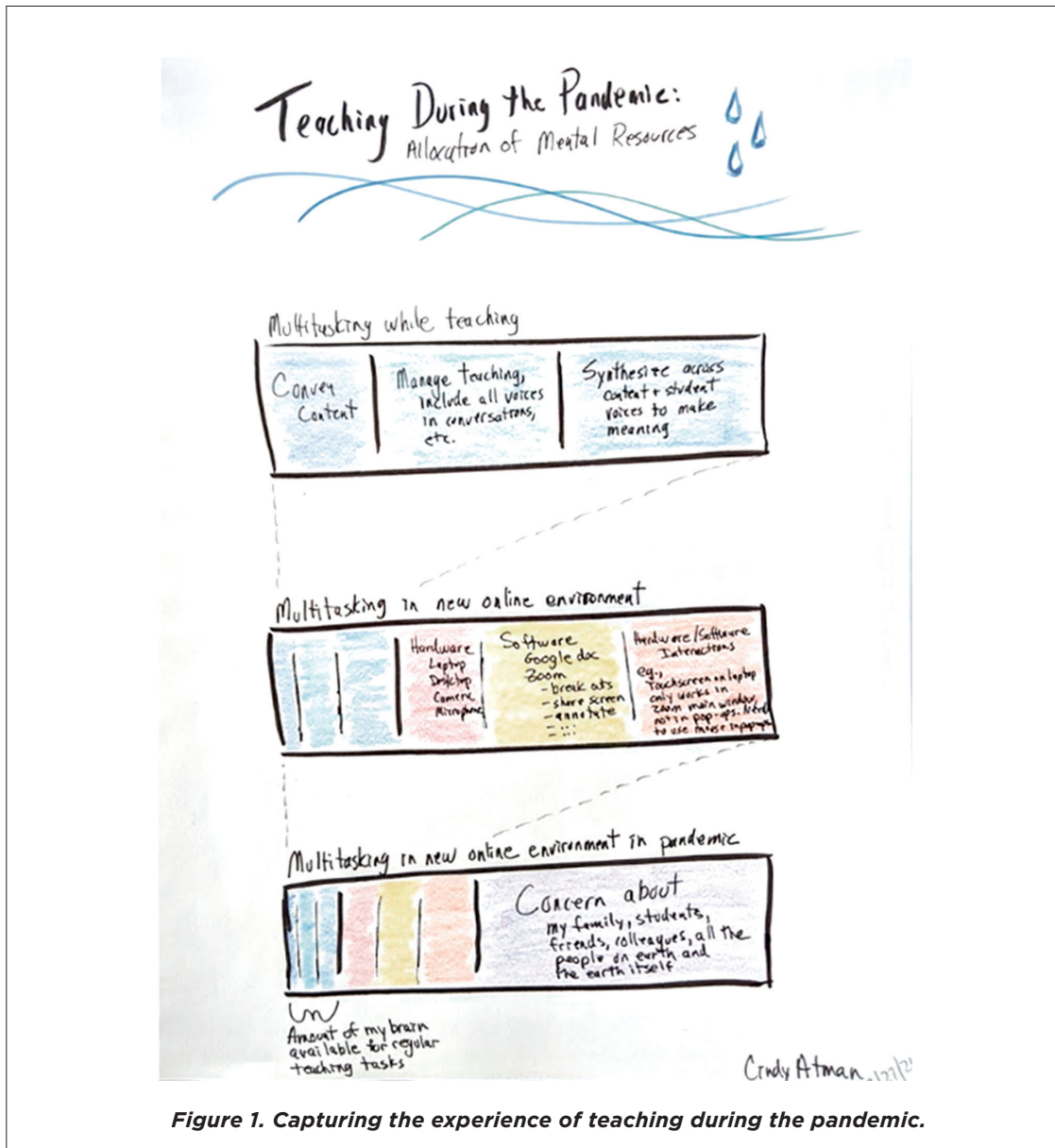


Figure 1. Capturing the experience of teaching during the pandemic.

in learning environments (Turns et al., 2014.) In this paper I describe two reflection activities I used to help build community and caring into my online teaching in the pandemic. In addition to describing the activities, I also briefly describe what was possible to learn about student and educator engagement, knowledge gains, and behavior changes (Turns and Roldan, 2019.)

The activities I describe took place in two courses and an informal meeting with students in the Human Centered Design & Engineering Department at the University of Washington in the spring quarter of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (a quarter taught entirely online). I used the same technology configura-



Table 1. Google slide decks for four class sessions.

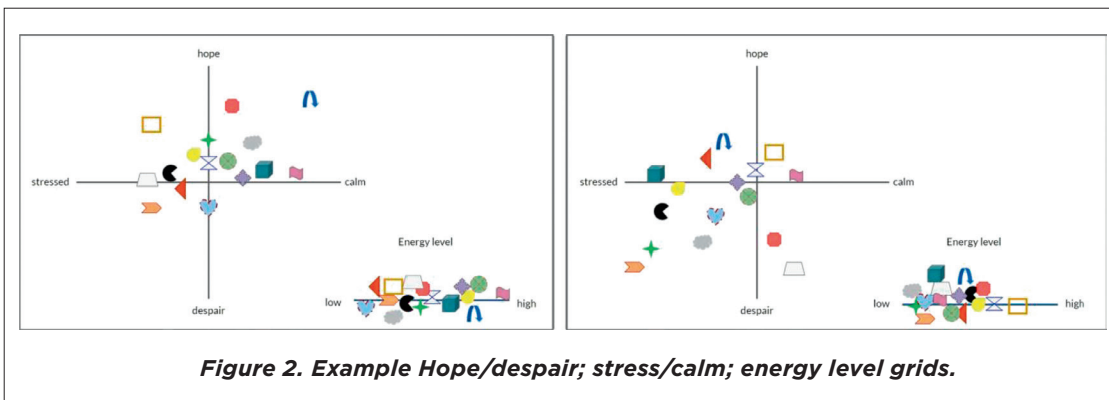
Class	Early class in the quarter	Class towards the end of the quarter
Design Methodologies Class (4 credit class, met twice weekly, 19 PhD students)	https://tinyurl.com/y9fxuexc	https://tinyurl.com/yc6zjfhp
Dear Design Seminar (2 credit pass/fail seminar, met once weekly, 12 undergraduate and masters students) Details: https://tinyurl.com/yaayb6oz	https://tinyurl.com/y84n6ahc	https://tinyurl.com/yazf6emr

tion for all interactions: 1) conversations using Zoom, and 2) learning activities navigated using Google slides in real time. Specifics about the classes and links to example slide decks are provided in Table 1.

CARING AND COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM: “CHECK-IN” SLIDE

I used multiple strategies to create community and caring in the online environment - in the initial framing of the class and during each class session. At the start of the quarter (see Google slide decks, Table 1, Column 2), I explicitly discussed how the concept of community was the main way that we would survive the quarter. I used the sketch in Figure 1 to anchor a discussion of our stressful situation. I also included a beautifully written list of principles written by Brandon Bayne for a class at North Carolina State, including: “we will foster intellectual nourishment, social connection, and personal accomodation” (Supiani, 2020.)

I also tried to simulate the informal kinds of discussions you can have at the beginning of each class through the Zoom chat, or on a Google slide (e.g., “jot down three words that capture your journey to class today”, “note your favorite podcast”). The most impactful thing I did to set the tone for the class each day was a reflective “check-in” slide that took the form shown in Figure 2 by the second week of the term (also see Google slide decks, Table 1, Column 3.) I was inspired to do this





after learning about it from Mitchell Fajardo, who developed this and used it in his first class in an online introductory course called Explorations in Human Centered Design & Engineering.

On a Google slide at the beginning of each class, the students and I reflected on our current state, and placed a symbol on a grid to represent where we felt that day in terms of stress/calm and hope/despair. This can also be accomplished with the share-screen function with Zoom. Later in the quarter I also added an indicator for level of energy. Symbols are inserted anonymously - so no one knew which symbol was whose (each of us used the same symbol across the quarter.) After everyone was done placing their symbol, we all knew where we were as a group that day. Figure 2 presents example grids that were inspired by several grids from across the classes of how students felt at different points in the quarter. I was then able to start the class with comments on our state of mind as a group, and remind all of us to support each other in our breakout groups and conversations. This took about 3 minutes of a 2 hour class. In the last class we used the set of slides from the quarter as a prompt to reflect on our journey across the quarter together.

The “check-in” slide was very useful for me as a teacher. In terms of engagement, the slides made the state of our emotions concrete. In terms of behavior, I was able to determine where the class was in terms of stress, and could adjust the pace of the class in real time. To gather the student perspective on what they had gained from the activity, I had an informal conversation with Khadijah Jordan, Nicole Washington and Shiva Anem about the impact of the “check-in” slides. Two students had also had experiences with a similar grid (energy/happiness) in a class called “Topics in Human-Computer Interaction” taught by Hyewon Suh. These three students reported that the use of the slides accomplished the items below.

- Showed that the professor cares about their wellbeing
- Showed that the professor can be contacted for assistance
- Helped the professor to assess what external forces may be impacting performance
- Validated their mental/emotional state
- Built a sense of community if others are feeling the same way
- Set up an atmosphere for reflection and conversation
- Motivated students to be more engaged during class

The students further indicated that the caring function was particularly significant to them.

CARING AND COMMUNITY OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM: SKETCH & KVETCH SESSIONS

As the winter quarter ended and we were heading into quarantine, it was clear that some students (and I) wanted to stay connected outside of formal classes. Seven students who had been in previous classes with me met informally via Zoom once a week for an hour. We would fill out the

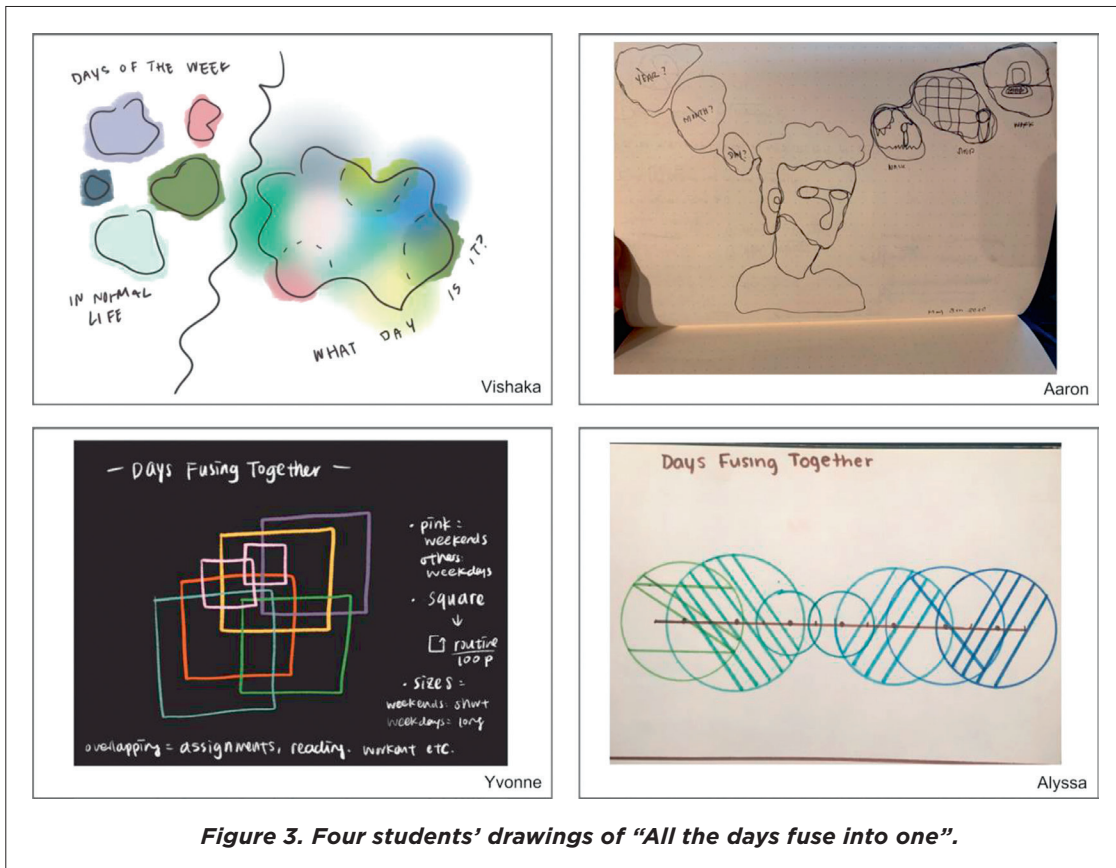


Figure 3. Four students' drawings of "All the days fuse into one".

“check-in” grid from Figure 2 and then chat (or kvetch) about how we were doing. Kvetch, in the form of complaint, was embraced as a gateway to engaging in and surfacing key commitments (Kegan, 2009.) Some topic would come up, we would sketch a response to it, share the sketches with each other and add them to a Google slide deck. The sharing of our sketches then enabled deeper reflection, connections and conversation. Topics across the quarter ranged from: “A day in the life of lockdown”, “Mapping workload/motivation/expectations,” and “All the days fuse into one” (see Figure 3.)

In terms of engagement, the students (and I) looked forward to this hour all week. The students appreciated the sessions in terms of the engagement itself and what they gained from the engagement, as demonstrated here:

“It is nice to have a time to just have some time in an inviting space, without pressure, commitment, or expectations. We’re able to just connect personally and discuss and reflect on the past week, which is very valuable.”

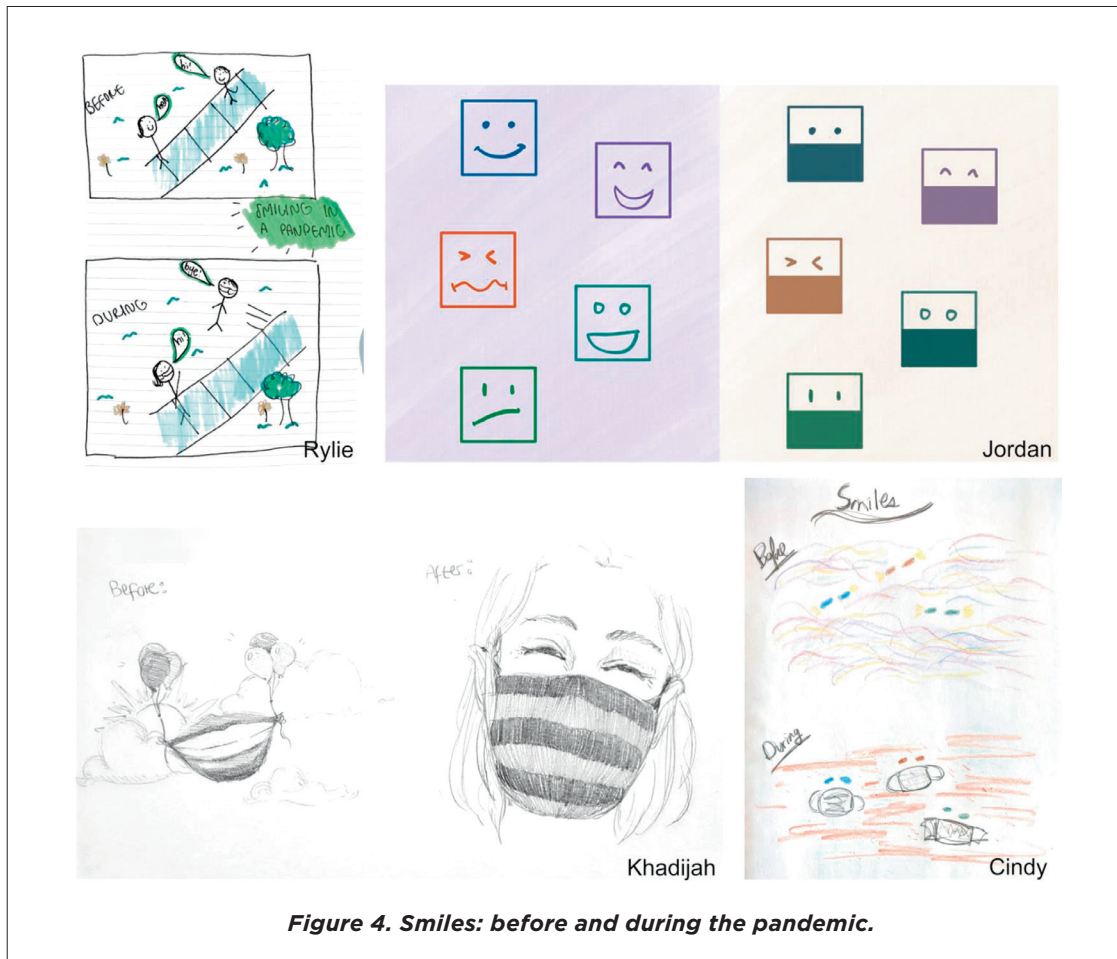


Figure 4. Smiles: before and during the pandemic.

NEXT STEPS

The pandemic continues. So will teaching online. I plan to use both of these reflection activities going forward, and would like to hear from you if you try them out (atman@uw.edu.)

The Sketch & Kvetch group continued to meet through the summer of 2020. I will leave you with a sketch about smiles before and during the pandemic (Figure 4), so that as a community we can remember that smiles are still with us as we struggle through this pandemic together.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation (EEC-1733474), the Center for Engineering Learning & Teaching at the University of Washington, the Mitchell T. and Lella Blanche



Bowie Endowment and the Mark and Carolyn Guidry Foundation. I would like to thank Jennifer Turns for her continual insights about teaching, learning and reflection and for her amazing help throughout the experience teaching in the pandemic - including co-teaching the Design Methodologies class. I would also like to thank Mitchel Fajardo, who inspired the hope/stress grid and Hyewon Suh who used a similar grid in her teaching. I would like to thank Khadijah Jordan, Nicole Washington and Shiva Anem for their insightful comments about the learning environment, as well as the students in the Sketch & Kvetch sessions: Yvonne Huang, Khadijah Jordan, Aaron Joya, Vishaka Nirmal, Alyssa Spickerman, Rylie Sweem, Jordan Yoon-Buck. And finally, I would like to thank Khadijah Jordan for her amazing help with pulling this paper together.

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