

TEACHING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

COURSE FACILITATION

This resource offers **strategies** for instructors **responding to crisis situations** while teaching.

Crises may happen as a **single incident** or **ongoing events** and are experienced as **individual** or **communal**. Examples include: threats to public or personal health or safety, climate change, humanitarian conflicts, or disrupted access to essential resources or medical care.



WHY SHOULD WE IMPLEMENT CRISIS PREPAREDNESS POLICIES?

TO PRIORITIZE LEARNING AND WELLNESS.

The following recommendations and reflection prompts are rooted in principles of the emerging field of “resilient pedagogy” (Clum et. al):

- Accountability
- Proactivity
- Flexibility (Sevillano et. al).

The Goal

Instructors may apply the following recommendations when relevant to mitigate the harm of both ongoing and discrete crises and center instructor and student wellness.



1. ALERT STUDENTS OF CLASS CANCELLATIONS PROMPTLY

Consider whether or not you have the ability and bandwidth to contact your students during or after a crisis.

When discrete or ongoing crises disrupt student learning or negatively affect instructor or student wellness, implement the following strategies to enhance safety, wellness, and engagement:



- **Do** cancel class, pivot your course's modality, or implement other emergency-prompted changes to your outlined course schedule as needed through a [Canvas announcement](#).

- **Don't** stress if you do not have the bandwidth to contact your students during or after a crisis. Focus on your own survival, and reach out to your students when it becomes possible. Trust that your students will understand the situation based on your "Crisis Preparedness" syllabus statement and proactive, collaborative conversations. If feasible, ask an appointed colleague to contact your students if you are unable to do so.

2. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

It's okay to ask for help and essential to prioritize your wellbeing. Practicing responsive, care-based pedagogy through the heightened stress of crisis situations involves additional emotional labor for instructors and students (Warner & Diao). You must prioritize your own recovery before you can effectively support your students and colleagues.



Use campus resources to prioritize your survival and wellness:

If you are a graduate student instructor:

Contact [UT Outpost](#), [Student Emergency Services](#), the [Student Emergency Fund](#), [University Health Services](#), or the [Counseling and Mental Health Center](#) for support.

If you are a postdoctoral lecturer, faculty or staff member:

Contact the [Staff Emergency Fund](#) or [Employee Assistance Program](#) for wellness services, resources, and referrals.

3. CHECK IN WITH YOUR STUDENTS

Recent or ongoing difficult circumstances negatively impact students' health and focus. When students are distracted or suffering, their engagement in courses is affected (Hash et al.).

Mitigate the negative impacts of crises and promote learning by intentionally checking in with students. Remind them of your co-created class community guidelines when classes resume:

Remind

Remind students about campus wellness resources.

Recognize

Recognize that students' needs may change during crisis situations.

Issue

Issue anonymous wellness surveys or guide written or verbal processing reflections to reduce barriers to learning.

Ask

Ask students directly for feedback to best support their learning under new and unexpected circumstances.

**Consider adapting some of these survey questions to target specific types of feedback*



4. PRIORITIZE SAFETY AND WELLNESS

Prioritizing your health and that of your students is crucial in creating a safe and effective classroom.

Anticipate changes in classroom behavior as students endure and recover from crises. While prioritizing your own boundaries and wellness, center excitement and joy through active learning opportunities in your classroom; this is especially important in the midst of ongoing difficult situations (hooks).



Familiarize yourself with these [“Establishing and Reinforcing Classroom Expectations”](#) and [“Responding to Disruptive Behavior Flowchart”](#) resources to prepare interventions in the event of student disruptions.

Consult this [“Trauma-Informed Pedagogy”](#) Infographic as you revise course content or adapt facilitation methods with student safety and wellness in mind.

5. HONOR ESTABLISHED EXCEPTIONS, EXTENSIONS, AND ALTERNATIVE COURSE TIMELINES

Implement crisis-related policies you proactively outlined in your syllabus as you resume classes during or after a crisis. Here are some examples of what this might look like in practice:

Adjust

Adjust course deadlines and offer reasonable extensions.

Request

Request student feedback on ways you may best support their learning during new or rapidly changing situations.

Communicate

Communicate every adjustment you make to students verbally and in writing.

Provide

Provide alternate assignment prompts or types as needed for the rest of the semester.

A Note for Teaching Teams: If you are a member of a teaching team, stay in touch with your colleagues and clearly communicate to confirm how policies are changing to ensure everyone implements new policies consistently and at the same time.

- **If you are the head of a teaching team:** Coordinate a meeting as soon as possible to check-in with your teaching team members about their own wellness and ability to implement changes to course facilitation and grading practices.
- **If you are a co-instructor, teaching assistant, or grader:** Reach out to your supervising faculty member for guidance as you implement approved changes and follow pre-approved alternate timelines established at the beginning of the semester.

6. IMPLEMENT LATE ASSIGNMENT LENIENCY

As you transition back to regular course meetings and adjusted deadlines, prioritize flexibility and student wellness as much as possible.

Remember

Remember students may be navigating multiple crises at a time (Mika-Brenson), and many of these crises may not be apparent to you. Unprecedented situations can disproportionately impact students due to differences in identities, lived experiences, or access to resources. Students never have identical learning needs, and crisis situations exacerbate existing disparities in access and support (Schell).

Do not penalize

Do not penalize students for late submissions during or immediately following a crisis.

Encourage

Encourage students to reach out if they require additional or different accommodations to achieve course learning goals.

Practice

Practice empathy and flexibility as you co-create reasonable course adjustments and re-evaluate deadlines for all students in response to crisis situations.



7. CONSIDER OFFERING ALTERNATE, CRISIS-RESPONSIVE COURSE CONTENT

If adjusting course content is appropriate given the nature or impact of a crisis, offer alternate materials to enhance student learning and wellness. Here's what this might look like:

Wellness-Motivated Revisions:

Allow students to engage with a different topic or text than those on your syllabus. Empower them to avoid triggering or re-traumatizing themselves in class during or after a crisis. Communicate why you are offering this choice to your students verbally and in writing.

Clarify how your expectations may have also changed in light of the crisis. Be mindful of assigning a new text that is accessible for free through [UT Library](#) or [Open Educational Resources \(OER\)](#), so that students will not incur unexpected costs once the semester has started.



Relevancy-Motivated Revisions:

Instructors who leverage current events to reinforce course concepts can prompt deep learning if their facilitation methods are effective (Eschenbacher & Fleming). Explore the recommended strategies on the next page to learn more about what this could look like in practice.



7. CONSIDER OFFERING ALTERNATE, CRISIS-RESPONSIVE COURSE CONTENT

Mindfulness Tip:

If you revise your course to cover relevant current events, remember that students will have varying - and often strong - emotional responses to those events. Consider applying the following practices:

Give

Give students the option to engage with the original assigned materials if they prefer to do so.

Monitor

Monitor your own emotional responses during the discussion and pivot if you experience harm or perceive student harm.

Facilitate

Facilitate class discussions with extra patience. Be prepared to redirect or end the discussion if it becomes too emotionally-charged.

Share

Share campus wellness resources. Consider framing discussions about current events with student wellness check-ins or reflections.



8. ACKNOWLEDGE AND GROW FROM YOUR MISTAKES



We are all human. You may be just as overwhelmed as your students as you navigate an unexpected crisis while modifying your facilitation methods in real time. In some cases, you may be disproportionately impacted by a situation that does not affect all or any of your students. Be patient with yourself and with your students.

Apologize if you fail to communicate effectively with your students during and/or after a crisis, if you inadvertently mismanage a difficult class discussion, if you do not effectively implement the flexible policies you proposed in your syllabus, or if your students communicate to you that an action you did or did not take caused harm. Take accountability for your mistakes. Ask your students for feedback to move forward collaboratively and productively for the rest of the semester.

Self-reflection is key to maintaining growth-mindset as an instructor (Harrington and Zakrajsek 168), and research shows that students are more likely to engage again and learn more fully in a course when an instructor apologizes after damaging trust (Whittaker and Breaux 182).

9. REFLECT ON NEXT STEPS THIS SEMESTER AND BEYOND

As you alter your course to respond to discrete or ongoing crises, make a note of the changes you make when you can. Consider jotting down your thoughts and questions in a teaching journal.

Here are some prompts to guide your reflection:

- What is one effective change or pivot I made this semester? How did I know it was successful?
- What is one thing I wish I could have done differently? How can I apply what I have learned the next time I teach this course?
- What is one piece of student feedback related to my crisis preparedness pivot that I wish to implement in the future?

You may explore additional reflection prompts [here](#).



Your thoughts:

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APPENDIX A: SOLICITING STUDENT INPUT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Here are some questions you may consider asking your students in a pre-course survey or collaborative crisis preparedness discussion:

- What are some discussion guidelines we can establish together to ensure respectful discussion, especially as it relates to difficult course content or current events?
- What has been a successful strategy one of your instructors has implemented during a crisis or stressful situation in the past? Why do you think the strategy was effective? How did it help you?
- Is there anything you would like me to know about you or your situation so that I may better support you this semester? Here are some prompts you may consider:
 - Are you currently impacted by a situation or current events that might affect your engagement in our course?
 - Now that you have reviewed our syllabus, are there any topics or course materials that you are concerned might be difficult for you? If so, is there anything I can do to best support you as we cover that material?
 - Have you historically lost power or internet access during unexpected climate-related events in Austin? Is this a concern you have about the upcoming semester?
 - Do you have any questions about the “Crisis Preparedness” section of our syllabus? Do you have any recommendations for ways I can alter or add to this commitment?
 - What recommendations do you have for me about ways I can best communicate or offer support during crisis situations?

APPENDIX B:

INSTRUCTOR END OF SEMESTER SELF-REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Consider including some or all of the following self-reflection questions as you consider revising your course after managing a crisis situation:

- What do I think went well during this pivot that I want to replicate in my course design moving forward?
- How did I attend to my own needs and wellness throughout the process? What campus resources or support did I access or wish I had accessed? What can I do to take care of myself moving forward?
- What could have gone better as I pivoted? What changes will I make to adjust my course this semester to better support student learning and wellness under the current circumstances?
- What questions do I have about how to move forward with my wellness and the wellness of my students in mind? What feels possible or impossible at this moment?
- Who is a colleague or mentor in my department or in a unit on campus (e.g., CTL) who might be able to offer feedback on my syllabus and Canvas course? What type of feedback on my course design and facilitation methods do I hope to receive? What concerns do I have about my current approaches?
- What student feedback should I solicit, consider, or implement to enhance my crisis preparedness as an instructor?