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## Reflections from a Graduate Student: Adapting Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy in the time of a Pandemic

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# Reflections from a Graduate Student: Adapting Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy in the time of a Pandemic

## Abstract

During COVID-19, being a graduate student has been difficult. There are challenges in building and sustaining communities in digital spaces and other unforeseen difficulties. In these difficulties, we have students experiencing issues in addition to the pandemic and consequences of the underlying systemic problems that have worsened for marginalized groups and the systemic inequity inherent in the graduate education system. In any case, this paper is a mission from me, the graduate student, to articulate a few suggestions professors could add to the practice to center both student lives and academics through trauma-sensitive pedagogy.

## Keywords

Trauma, Brave spaces, flux pedagogy, student voices

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## Cover Page Footnote

Thank you Jennifer Borgioli Binis for your expertise. Thank you Dr. Raymond Smith. Thank you all friends and colleagues both inside and outside of Indiana University Bloomington.

## INTRODUCTION

I can still remember how I felt when one of my professors started the semester with carefully crafted “check-ins” for us to share stories about our experiences during COVID-19. I was the child of a newly diagnosed parent with Alzheimer’s disease. I was a graduate student determined to maintain a 4.0. I was nearly always traveling so I could work to help my parents pay the bills. I felt like I was just surviving but, in that moment, I felt seen and heard. I appreciated that she asked us to share how we were doing during these times. I did not give details about my parent’s illness, but I shared the fact I used the phrase “I love you” with my parents for the first time in my life. Later, I mentioned I was my parent’s overnight caretaker and that I was worried about finishing the work I had due for my classes.

A few moments later, my professor sent me a private message in the online chat. She wrote, *family first, take care of home*. It meant more to me than she could possibly know. I was exhausted from my flights, from helping my parents, and from trying to meet the 11:59pm deadline for assignments. When she private messaged me, to me, she centered the humanness of my classmates and myself, helped us learn that the work will always be there, and encouraged us to protect our overall well-being. I thought maybe this is something other professors could try as well.

## THANK YOU FOR CARING

In one of the most traumatic years in global history, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) reported over 119 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 2.64 million deaths. With the increase in vaccination programs and more contagious variants, the infection rate is declining in some places but increasing in others. The health, employment, and education disparities that existed prior to the pandemic have been exacerbated, including those experienced by students enrolled in graduate programs (Smalley, 2021). The National Center for Education Statistics reported 3.1 million graduate students were enrolled in a program for the Fall 2019 semester (NCES, 2020). I am one of those students, and like my fellow students, I am not immune to the compounding challenges presented by being a student during a global pandemic.

In this article, I use my experiences and those of my colleagues, and lessons from existing research to lay out an answer to the question, “how might trauma-sensitive pedagogy inform graduate pedagogies during times of plague?” There is an observable gap between graduate students’ experiences during online learning and professor’s pedagogical approaches that should be interrogated and reflected upon. I explore ways professors can better help graduate students during

the pandemic that have lasting benefits even after the pandemic ends. While some professors have worked to be responsive to graduate students, few likely received specific support on how to be trauma responsive in moments like these (Rahimi et al., 2021; Sonsteng & Loomis, 2001). Furthermore, this single text neither aims to solve all the problems faced by graduate students, and their professors during a pandemic, nor is it absolute to trauma sensitive pedagogy, but these are suggested practices that can help support graduate students experience while trying to maintain productivity and mental health. While I was positioned as a graduate student, during the peaks of global trauma, COVID-19, this paper emerged from my desire to sustain myself, my colleagues across the country, and our teacher education professors who, just like us, are doing their best.

## **GRADUATE STUDENT SUPPORT**

Graduate school is a demanding pursuit. We must successfully pass a series of courses, qualifying exams, and a dissertation defense. We are expected to publish, network, and participate in a full range of activities deemed necessary for successful doctoral students. This is in addition to the demands of our personal and professional lives outside the graduate program. In Fernandez et al.'s (2019) study, they found that the most common graduate students' challenges are juggling responsibilities, securing funding support, negotiating issues related to equity and institutional barriers, and the job market. They offered students suggestions including finding reliable mentors, focusing on finishing their dissertation, being true to yourself, and cultivating professional networks. Many of these solutions, though, were not available to us during the 2020-2021 academic year.

Like other countries, America's students experienced school through a computer screen in 2020; this includes graduate students. Smalley (2021) says coronavirus had a significant disruption in colleges and universities, with most institutions canceling face-to-face instruction and shifting to online only. The statistics, though, do not speak to the experience of being a graduate student during a pandemic. These statistics do not capture the emotional pressure and weight that graduate students carry regularly that intensified during the pandemic with possible children learning from home, and other life changes.

While both undergraduates and graduate students were dealing with fears of being exposed or busy helping family members who had been exposed or infected, it is harder on graduate students as we are theoretically, oftentimes, working adults who are struggling with work life balance (Yusuf et al., 2020). Many of us lost family members or contracted COVID-19, but felt unable to share our experiences, fearing talking about them was inappropriate for graduate study spaces. So, many of us withheld information about our struggles and did our best

to proceed as usual. The truth, though, is that we should have critical care and assistance in ways that are like undergraduate support, but unique to the world of graduate studies.

Online graduate students need a different type of support to allow them to build community. In her research, Berry (2017) found that the community for graduate students is influenced heavily by cohorts, study groups, small peer groups, and class groups. They are less reliant on faculty because they do not have direct access to them. So, they build their own community or professional network. Because of this, the shift to online instruction that resulted from the pandemic was a shift that professors may not have been pedagogically ready to do because it calls for more attention to graduate students. Fedynich et al. (2015) citing Sahin and Shelly (2008) encouraged course designers to center students' needs and perceptions when designing, developing, and delivering online courses. This need is, of course, compounded by the pandemic. Studies like these can identify the problem and offer solutions.

## **FLUX PEDAGOGY: A DISCUSSION FOR SUGGESTED STRATEGIES**

This piece is not a critique of professors; this was a call for help during a global pandemic. The stress of the pandemic has been compounded by political stress which was compounded by the pressure to succeed in academia. We may not all use the term, but we have all been traumatized in one way or another by the events of the pandemic. For some of us, the trauma has been exacerbated because of race, gender, or disability status. During this pandemic, we also had an uproar in racial wars and discrimination like the increase in xenophobia towards Asian countries and murder of George Floyd which led to Black Lives Matter. These were all tensions students worked through during the pandemic. Teacher education professors were likewise experiencing the compounding stressors which include teaching future teacher educators how to teach in both a pandemic and non-pandemic era.

In a recent conversation with a first-semester student about her experiences during COVID-19 as a home health aide, graduate student, and a mother conducting homeschool, she shared that during her class meetings, her professors, and classmates, "ignore me as if they're putting me in time out." She went on to explain, "My professors make me feel like I do not exist. They often ignore me because I go too deep into conversation. I want to speak, but they do not let me. They treat me like a child because adults do not go into timeouts." In this case, the professor could have reached out and asked more about students' needs, experience with online learning, and present the norms for online learning. If the professor was more inquisitive and possibly frontloaded more, the student

could have possibly been more comfortable and could have understood the norms for an online learning space. The graduate student could have also taken the initiative to meet with her professor to learn how the professor operationalizes their online learning space. It is likely that her professor did not understand what she was experiencing and there was a general disconnect in their communication and interactions. This student's story serves as a reminder of a different gap, the one between teacher educators' intentions and the impression on students.

As we talked, I realized she felt minimized by the experience, beholden to the power dynamic between professor and students, between more experienced students and newer students. Also, it appears as if her identity was being judged or threatened based on the "doer's" understanding or perceptions of her. She knew that her professor was unaware of her positioning and obligations and could not predict the impact ignoring her may have had on her anxiety or her mental health. When I asked her about the impact of the pandemic on her, she told me about a loved one who contracted the virus and wanted to harm himself because of the pain.

“...And this person is. He is a very strong person, at least what he, you know, he put it out there. He is a very strong person. And for this person to express the thought of wanting to jump through the window. That was very hard, and to know that that's my son. Father. That was very it was very shocking to me and so forth, so you know I had to talk him out and talk him out and talking with him constantly being on the phone with him, to make sure that you know all these things aren't happening, the cries, to hear a big man cry non-stop. Yeah, it was. It wasn't a good experience at all”.

There is a certain presumption in a graduate student offering advice to her teacher education professors. Yet, we need professors to take more consideration of our livelihoods, to see us more than they do, to hear our concerns, and actively seek out our voices. Granted, the student could have shared her experience with the professor and allowed the professor to decide to be supportive or not. Instead, the responsibility laid upon the hands of the professor to almost “read the mind” of the student or assume the student's experiences. In this situation, there is a consideration of balance, and that balance may be the cultivation of a space where students are able to openly share their experiences with their professor, so the professor have a fair chance to make an informed response to their students.

I am confident those responsible for teaching graduate students can remember their own graduate school experiences, especially their first year when so much depended on building relationships (Fernandez et. al, 2019). Now more than ever, students need to know that our learning communities support us as we

negotiate the ambiguities of our studies and futures (Fernandez et. al, 2019). As a teacher and graduate student, I see the importance of student-teacher relationships in online learning for all students, especially during the pandemic. Students need to know they have a leader they can depend on and a space to find support. Graduate students need to be able to share their ideas and expressions to benefit our work and well-being in our courses. Too often, however, we are unable to count on our graduate programs for that space.

To cultivate that inviting atmosphere in online learning, we, as educators, need to understand how we have been contributing to silence over time. There is an art to silencing, even when done unintentionally; we are the artists. Teachers, researchers, professors, practitioners, and other education leaders at all levels play a role in suppressing students. In these roles, we create imaginary boundaries that may limit students' responsiveness, indirectly stifling them, and ourselves. The ability to communicate may be the difference between moral and ethical dilemmas of life and death, whether literally or figuratively. It can be the difference between a graduate student finding their professional footing or faltering.

One possible solution can be found through “flux pedagogy” (Ravitch, 2020) which is based on the research of trauma-informed pedagogy and reflects the author’s experiences and suggestions for educators at all levels, offers a variety of interventions professors can consider. The general theme of the piece is an invitation to educators to move into a more flexible and open position as a pedagogue. She encourages us all to adopt a reflexive learning stance and radical compassion, or radical self-care (Ravitch, 2020). The balance I previously suggested between teacher and student connections and the need for space to discuss different occurrences in life can be achieved through the compassion and self-care she proposes. She integrates several frameworks to reimagine what it means to teach in the context of COVID-19. Ravitch’s integrated approaches to self-care and compassion can help everyone involved in graduate programs better understand each other’s reality and be more empathetic. In the next section, I lay out the suggestions I would like to offer graduate school professors based on my experiences, conversations with my fellow graduate students, and the ideas offered by Ravitch (2020).

### **SUGGESTION 1: CREATE BRAVE SPACES**

In her piece, Ravitch (2020) differentiates between *safe spaces* and *brave spaces*. A *safe space* is “a place where everyone feels comfortable enough to speak openly about their opinions and to share their experiences, feelings, ideas, and concerns” (Ravitch, 2020, p.12). However, a *safe space* for one person may not be the same for another. A *brave space* requires bravery, leadership engagement, and

ongoing leader modeling that allow for deeper issues in education to delve deeper than the surface. She offers brave spaces as better options because they offer integrity whereas safe spaces have a sense of universal politeness. In other words, students may be less likely to speak up if politeness is the driving norm. In contrast, brave space pedagogy invites students into authentic and critical dialogic about course content. These brave spaces can exist in online settings.

There are limited options like synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid sessions for online classes, which dictate how often a class meets and how much they will meet. In an asynchronous setting, professors could order synchronous sessions to actively check in with students' well-being because, besides academics, students need mentorship on how to do life as a graduate student. Therefore, flux pedagogy or some version of it should be implemented to acknowledge graduate student experiences in a particular learning community, understanding that no one situation looks alike, and everyone does not react the same to traumatic events.

As a graduate, we often hear graduate school is supposed to be difficult, and there should be an academic haze, but during a world crisis, a pandemic, that is, the academic haze. Put student experiences and growth in their academics at the center during a pandemic. According to Ellie Mejia from City Bureau Newsletter (Holman & Mejia, 2019), brave spaces "cultivate a productive dialogue where participants are encouraged to speak honestly and critically from their own experience toward the end of mutual learning and liberation." Therefore, uplifting students' voices creates meaningful moments for students to find and sustain agency. By speaking honestly and thus developing a brave space, students may have more productive outcomes.

## **SUGGESTION 2: RECOGNIZE THE DIVERSE INFLUENCE OF COVID-19 FOR ALL STUDENTS**

Ravitch (2020) suggests teachers:

“Listen carefully to each student to understand the macro and micro sociopolitical forces present in their educational and life experiences during COVID-19. This means inquiring into and discussing issues of structural inequity and intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2020) as they are embodied and playing out right now in the lives and educational experiences of our students and their families and communities (Ravitch, 2020, p.5)”.

As emerging researchers and graduate students, we may need care conversations that center our visibility and the impact of COVID-19 on our lives to stay



encouraged during online learning. Therefore, I suggest professors work with graduate students to uplift their voice through their work and research interests. Encourage students to use their voices to feel visible in their online schooling. Through this, professors may allow students to feel community even though it is virtual. From here, professors can have an end of the semester recap where they uplift, celebrate, and applaud students for their tenacity and diligence during uncertain times; this builds an authentic community and appreciates the disparate impacts of COVID-19.

### **SUGGESTION 3: HOLD 1:1 WELLNESS MEETINGS**

Ravitch (2020) recommends professors attune his/herself to their trauma, student's trauma, and community concerns. To do this, check-in sessions can help create and maintain community in school via relationship development among peers and professors that may help professors become aware of traumas. Many people may feel disassociated during this pandemic as they are not seeing people regularly, so these synchronous check-ins can help with that. For example, I have a colleague who felt displaced and lost in her program because she has not had viable opportunities to build relationships with her other colleagues. According to her, *"I am lost, and unhappy. I am over this stuff. I'm a third-year, and I feel unsupported"*. Her feelings are not void of others; it is like other stories graduate students tell regarding the isolation graduate school brings and the pandemic's exclusion and loneliness. Often professors want students to be present for them and support them in their workload; however, this is not always reciprocated. This trauma-sensitive strategy, a check-in, might be the difference between life or death or a pass or fail because centers a student's mental health and wellness. In contrast to office hours, this wellness check-in is a time set aside for students and professors to connect and exchange matters outside of the classroom. Wellness check-ins are more about centering student lives than they are about centering course material or other things of the like. Another practice that can enact a trauma-sensitive practice is a virtual revolving door for students to work with professors, share their trials, tribulations, and maybe even their victories during the pandemic. In this revolving door, professors could allow students to "pop-in" during certain hours to share their concerns. Allowing students to pop remote access to professors demonstrates that the professors acknowledge the semester's difficulties and can support students within reason. With those times, professors could also offer independent office private conversation or brave space to provide private chat and bravery.

While this sounds extreme, it is a truth for many because a global pandemic is present, global race and racial uprising, global economic struggle, global education challenge, among other things, which signals the benefits of a

trauma-sensitive pedagogy. At the very least, the professor could organize a time to welcome students, mid-semester check-ins, and an exit session to set the semester's tone.

#### **SUGGESTION 4: CHECK AND DOUBLE-CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING**

Ravitch states,

“Consider your own communication style to gain deeper insights into how others perceive you. Remember that understanding has less to do with what is said or intended as it does in how the messaging is perceived, which is mediated by culture and context so eschew defensiveness and invite authentic and critical dialogue with students (Ravitch, 2020, p. 5)”.

I remember speaking with a colleague, and she was frustrated because she did not understand her professor's feedback, and I could not explain it either. She felt like all her work was inferior, and she was discouraged from continuing her work. This COVID-19 pandemic boosted her stress levels as she was continually wavering between seeing herself as a good student or whether she had been taught incorrectly in the past and lacked the skills to be a productive graduate student. In any case, she voiced her concerns and kept on pushing; she is a fighter. After speaking with her classmates, she was motivated to continue working hard in class. This story was evident that the feedback my colleague received was not clear and did not directly support her growth and morale as a graduate student. Through various feedback tools, written or voiced, professors can check and double check for student understanding of all information provided in the course including feedback. Clear understanding can help the student feel supported by their professors.

My colleague felt as if she was in graduate school, taking a space holder course, and looking to get out of it because she struggled continuously. Her professor rarely followed up to see if she understood what she needed to do or what was asked of her. Checking and double checking for understanding could have helped her realize what was asked of her by her professor.

#### **SUGGESTION 5: HAVE FLEXIBLE BOUNDARIES**

Ravitch (2020) recommends teachers *remain flexible and adjust to the situation*. Professors can do this by continuously building a system of support and understanding. Allow space in pedagogy to adapt to any situation so graduate students again feel comfortable to interact with professors. My colleague is an

example of what support and understanding can do if communication is open. She faced challenges so flexible boundaries from professors could occur in a graduate setting to help students feel they are in a supportive environment.

### **SUGGESTION 6: BUILD COMMUNITY WITHOUT YOU: DEVELOPING PEER COMMUNITIES**

Organize a non-refereed peer review community for students to build relationships. This can be in an online interface where meetings occur by having students sit in a zoom or any other space to disclose how they would like peer reviews to be structured. This does not need to be monitored by the professor and allows students some autonomy within their online learning community to have academic camaraderie. Peer review should not be rigid and overly structured. This will embrace flux pedagogy's asset-based pedagogies where the education community can develop their competencies (Ravitch, 2020) at its finest as it centers students and their perspectives and gives them the responsibility to transform their own educational experience online. To navigate this, it might look like creating some inquiry questions for students to answer and using those questions to build a foundation for how they would learn with their peers. Share thoughts and discuss the work without teacher or professor supervision. Trust students' intellectual abilities and create their professional learning communities that do not involve professors. This critical pedagogy perspective allows students to become teachers and teachers to become learners and opens the door for natural open learning. This helps them feel as if their views and interests matter and be their genuine self without feeling like there is an assessment attached to their interactions.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I sought to recognize the demands placed on professors while advocating for myself and my fellow graduate students. Generally, many graduate students try to balance the demands of the world around us with the skills needed for on-line learning. There are ways to make this all a little easier and I believe that by adopting the strategies listed above (Create Brave Spaces, Make visible COVID-19 Impact, Hold 1:1 Check-in Meetings, Check and Double-check for Understanding, Have Flexible Boundaries, Build Community without You) and considering Ravitch's (2020) ideas around flux-pedagogy, graduate students will be supported.

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