ESSAY

Kindness and Community in an Online Asynchronous Classroom

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Abstract

Online asynchronous courses have become increasingly popular since the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of these courses, where there is no standard meeting time and the students get to decide when to work on the class, poses a particular challenge for professors seeking to form a kind classroom community. This article fills that void by providing ideas on how to implement the pedagogy of kindness into online asynchronous classrooms. The article explores examples of how faculty can create a kind and inclusive space with better syllabus creation, offering students more flexible due dates, and creating more meaningful communication between faculty and students. A kind academic classroom can support students and help them understand how professors are there to facilitate their success while giving students the confidence needed to learn and grow. Lastly, an uplifting environment can make universities more welcoming places for all students. This article offers a special focus on Bronx Community College, a two-year associate degree institution which is also a Hispanic-Serving Institution.

Keywords:

pedagogy of kindness, online learning, classroom community, asynchronous classes, college teaching

On March 11, 2020, I was walking into the classroom when my phone beeped with a breaking news alert: New York Governor Andrew Cuomo was closing all public universities in the state effective that day (Niedzwiadek & Touré, 2020).[1] The novel coronavirus was wreaking havoc on New York, and all university functions, including teaching and learning, were going online. This was only the beginning of a perilous journey for myself and my students.

That month New York City encountered the worst. Sirens raged throughout the night and day. In the middle of my academic semester, New York's EMTs responded to more than 5,000 emergency calls while more than 1,000 New Yorkers died from COVID-19 each day (Silva & Winter, 2020). The largest proportion of those deaths was concentrated in the city's Latino community. Teaching at Bronx Community College, which is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and living in the Bronx, hearing the suddenly familiar sound of the sirens blaring, it was clear that my class was not going to be the most important thing to my students. But I still needed to teach (Gonen, Choi, & Velasquez, 2020).

The City University of New York remained an online institution for the next year—not returning to in-person teaching until fall 2021. To accommodate this new modality, I spent the summer of 2020 rethinking my teaching. This included how to deliver content online and how to change my goals for the newly online course. While reading Kevin M. Gannon's *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (2020), I recognized that I needed to focus on the student as a person in a more comprehensive manner. I could no longer rely on the face-to-face connections which in-person teaching helped to create. Citing research by other scholars, Katie Burke and Stephen Larmar (2020) found that online classes often have lower engagement and sense of

identity, with students caring far less about their classes in online environments as compared to face-to-face classrooms (p. 2). Underscoring Burke and Larmar's research is a provocative article by Ellen Rose (2017), who argues that online asynchronous teaching has led to "faceless humans" in classrooms where students feel less connected with one another (p. 24). This, Rose argues, has negative ethical results for education and society. This has led to the concern that with the rise of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, academics were about to experience a digidemic: a digital pandemic (Alam & Hoon, 2021). How could I still create a community with my students whom I would never actually meet?

Prior to the COVID pandemic, I retained a lot of my received wisdom about teaching. This wisdom argued that professors should mirror the real world and be tough and clear with students. This meant that deadlines were serious (though excused extensions were common). While I worked to make a connection with my students and to know more about their lives, the classwork was always paramount. With COVID upending the normal way of life, I could not pretend that my work was paramount anymore. My pedagogy needed to be updated, and Gannon's work gave me a good direction to begin to take.

Helping to complete the journey of transforming my teaching was a talk which occurred during my third online COVID semester given by Catherine Denial at Queens College in March 2022. This talk was about her emerging scholarship: the pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2022). Although Denial and Gannon did not originate the pedagogy of kindness (Burke & Larmar, 2020), their works resonated with me, helping me rethink how I view student interactions, classroom management, and academic assignments. They helped me recognize that faculty need to treat students using the Golden Rule: treat students as we wish to be treated. They are doing the hard work of learning; we need to be there by their side every step of the way. This work of supporting students is complicated in an online asynchronous environment, but it is not impossible.

This article will focus on applying the ideas and principles for building kindness and respect into an online asynchronous course. Working with students, learning about them as individuals, and helping guide their success is a tricky proposition during the best of times. This challenge is exacerbated by teaching classes where students choose the time and pace of their work. The principles and strategies employed were made possible because of my work at a Hispanic-Serving Institution and community college where teaching is prioritized by faculty and innovation is accepted by departmental chairs and colleagues. This article will focus on three specific areas where faculty can work to be kinder and more honest with students: syllabus creation, deadline setting, and communication styles. In all three areas, faculty should strive to help our students grow as learners and scholars.

Kindness in the Classroom

Catherine Denial (2019) has helped popularize the pedagogy of kindness. Her ideas revolve around one simple concept: Why not be kind? This is a simple but important question for all professors. Denial defines kindness by asking professors to believe our students, to believe in our students, and to communicate honestly in a way that makes them feel comfortable and respected. We should recognize them as collaborators in their educational journey and help guide them to achieve their goals (Denial, 2019).

Faculty should intuitively understand the importance of Denial's ideas. After all, faculty demand kindness and respect from those we work with. For example, respect is often viewed as a means of mitigating the problem of faculty burnout. Burnout has been a major problem in academia since prior to the pandemic. The sources of burnout are multi-faceted, but as Michelle Pautz, Jessica Dewey, and Martha Diede (2023) note in *Inside Higher Ed*, kindness can help alleviate some of the problems. To improve campus culture and reduce burnout, they recommend campus administrators work to improve communication with faculty, offer better recognition of faculty for their work, and create a "culture of civility." If those strategies are viable options to help faculty wellbeing and productivity, then the same strategies of communication, respect, and civility can help our students.

Similar to the pedagogy of kindness is the concept of creating a caring classroom. Brian Moorhouse and My Tiet (2021) argue that a caring classroom is one

where faculty and students work together to create an environment of mutual care. They note that this is particularly challenging in an online environment. They remind readers that "in the in-person classroom, we use multiple cues…to familiarize us with our learners and consider their needs during lessons. However, in the online classroom, these are harder to gauge and require explicit alternative actions" (p. 216). Figuring out how to apply the ideas of care and kindness to an online class, especially an asynchronous class where students can dictate when to engage the class material, poses numerous challenges.

It is important to make a classroom more welcoming, bring respect and civility to the class, and think about how our policies and ideas affect students and their drive to learn. Elizabeth Gorny-Wegrzyn and Beth Perry (2021) argue that an advantage of the pedagogy of kindness is that it can "empower learners, allow them to think independently, and engage them more fully thereby improving their academic achievements and increasing their social awareness" (p. 68). Being kind and compassionate encourages students to come to faculty with problems which can be solved together. As an added benefit, when faculty and students have a strong working relationship built upon respect and trust, Maha Bali and Yasser Tammer (2023) argue, it could reduce plagiarism, as students become more confident in their intellectual abilities. In short, caring and being kind can improve student learning outcomes, make the classroom and university a more welcoming place, and help the students be seen by representatives of the university. This is especially important at a Hispanic-Serving Institution like Bronx Community College where 46% of the student body is a first-generation student and is likely unfamiliar with many of the hurdles which college bureaucracy can create (Facts & Figures, 2023). Colleges can be cold and unwelcoming places; a friendly faculty member can change that reception among students.

But online asynchronous courses add an extra layer of complexity to this discussion. After all, it is harder to create an environment that empowers learners when there is no set time at which students must engage in their work. This is problematic at institutions like Bronx Community College where students like online asynchronous courses for the flexibility they offer. Online asynchronous courses give students maximum flexibility to both work and study. It allows students to take care of dependent family members, work a job, and go to school at the same time. At Bronx Community College, over a quarter of our students are supporting children (which does not count those supporting their parents) and more than half are working a job (Facts & Figures, 2023). Many of those, based on anecdotal conversations, are working more than 30 hours a week while at school full time. In short, online asynchronous classes enable the students to live their lives while also getting an education. Students like these asynchronous classes even though they pose a particular pedagogical challenge. They do not naturally foster a connection to the college and classmates nor do they offer students an escape from their home and lived lives. And these classes challenge faculty members who need to strategize to create a connection with someone they will only meet virtually.

In online asynchronous classes, students have less connection to the learning environment, the professor, and other students. This means they need to rely more heavily on intrinsic motivation than in traditional face-to-face classes (Lu et al. 2023). This problem of a self-paced learner who works independently of the class does not absolve the professor of creating a kind and welcoming environment; it only intensifies the efforts we must undertake. After all, online courses typically have "higher attrition rates" than face-to-face classes (Karim & Alam, 2021, p. 18). But, as Nur Syasya Karim and Meredian Alam (2021) argue, this can be countered by instructors who help students develop a sense of belonging. As Fiona Rawle (2021) argues, the pedagogy of kindness "can't be a checklist that is pasted over a syllabus that already exists – it needs to be foundational to course design and central to an instructor's teaching practice." This article will explore some ways to help instructors design a kind and caring online asynchronous course.

Syllabus Creation

Faculty should avoid turning our syllabi into modern terms of service agreements—the type which people agree to without reading. A syllabus should not be a mindless document to be ignored. Over the past decade, many scholars have written about ways to improve the syllabus. A syllabus serves as the first point of contact

between a professor and student. It can help the professor set the tone for the entire semester. If a professor wants to create a kind and caring environment, the professor must do so from the beginning. Richard J. Harnish and K. Robert Bridges (2011) have demonstrated that a friendly syllabus can improve student views of the professor and course. Additionally, Sherria D. Taylor et al. (2019) created the Social Justice Syllabus Design Tool. This tool helps professors write a syllabus "that signals belongingness, growth mindset, communal goals, clear and positive expectations, and success-orientation [which] assists in setting a welcoming tone that leads to greater student achievement and engagement" (p. 133). When faculty employ the Social Justice Syllabus Design Tool, we help our students counter unhelpful stereotypes while demonstrating inclusiveness in the classroom. This is especially important at Hispanic-Serving Institutions where the majority of students are people of color who often enter the classroom from a place of vulnerability to negative stereotypes (Taylor et al., 2019). Another method of improving the syllabus is recommended by An Equity Syllabus (n.d.), which offers professors practical advice for showing an engaging personality through their syllabus. Michelle Pacansky-Brock (n.d.) also highlights the importance of creating an accessible, welcoming, mobile-friendly syllabus which she shares with students *before* the semester begins. She does this to help "mitigate belonging uncertainty," which is especially common among students from marginalized groups. Pacansky-Brock uses a process that she calls the Liquid Syllabus to tell the student "I will be a partner in your learning."

By sending a welcome message to students, the faculty member can clearly signal the values we want to share. The best and earliest way for a student to know that you care about them is through a well-designed syllabus. Thus, my syllabus includes a simple preamble which welcomes them to the semester and states: "Your success is important to me and if you need help, have any questions, or just want to chat, please see me throughout the semester!" This helps convey how I see myself: as someone who is there to guide them as they do the hard work of learning.

An important theme running throughout the first two pages of my syllabus is the idea that life and studying are hard, but that I am here to help. Although I will be challenging them intellectually throughout the semester, my job is to educate them, not to make things more stressful for them. I am happy to try to mitigate some of the course's added stress. This includes a specific note that identifies outside issues which students should tell me about, including illnesses, deaths in the family, losing or gaining a job, and moving or getting evicted. These outside factors are important to acknowledge: they can help a professor teach the whole student rather than the fictional student whose life is perfect and whose thoughts are devoted exclusively to the class. After all, a student facing eviction (which happens annually at my institution) is going to be distracted. This student can still learn, but they will likely need more personalized care than others. Professors and students have a shared goal; it is important to acknowledge that and let the students know we are there to help them achieve this goal. I want students to know that they can tell me if their lives outside of the classroom are interfering with their classwork.

These efforts are part of a larger aim to help students recognize that my role in the class goes beyond taskmaster and assignment creator; I take responsibility for helping students learn and grow. My work will challenge them, but I will also help them. I am there to answer questions and offer support. I am trying to create the same type of environment I would want: one where the person with power has an open door and promises to work with me.

Due Dates

Scholars are beginning to question the adage that deadlines for projects are important real-world training for students (Thierauf, 2021; Patton, 2000). As Ashley Whillans (2021) notes, the idea that workers have important and immovable deadlines in the corporate world is not true. Instead, she points out, nearly half of all deadlines that workers encounter are flexible. In the professional world, many important deadlines are created as commitment devices and altering the deadlines is often not a problem. Extensions on work in the corporate world are often granted and result in higher quality work produced.

Kindness and Community *continued*

Deadlines for non-academic work are often flexible. If a professor's goal is to improve student learning while helping students excel, then being inflexible can be self-defeating. Melissa Hills and Kim Peacock (2022) identify nearly a dozen studies which show that deadlines increase stress while resulting in lower-quality work and reduced learning. When faculty turn to flexible deadlines, Hills and Peacock argue, the quality of the work improves while student stress levels decline. Importantly, flexible deadlines also equalize the playing field when dealing with students who are often focused on real-world problems outside of the classroom, as is common at community colleges. Students who are caring for family members or who must complete their studies while grappling with various disabilities might struggle to meet deadlines in a timely manner. But this does not make them incapable of completing quality work and learning. Hills and Peacock note most instructors have an unofficial policy of granting extensions upon request; if that is the case, it is more equitable to bake the extensions into the course (Hills & Peacock, 2022).

This research supports the pedagogy of kindness and the principle that students should be treated as faculty want to be treated—and faculty do not like deadlines in their own work. In addition to my teaching and scholarship, I serve as Book Review Editor for the H-Diplo network where I have commissioned over 800 book reviews over the past decade. Over that time, nearly a third of those individuals who have completed a review turned them in late, and that percentage has increased significantly since 2020. Academics miss deadlines regularly and usually their tardiness is accommodated. Why not with students? While there are final deadlines because we must turn in class grades, this does not preclude flexibility during the academic semester. It is better to be honest and open about that flexibility at the beginning of the semester to help reduce stress and be more equitable.

I include in my syllabus a note that any student can get a "poop happens" extension. Students do not need to offer an explanation, nor do they need to prove that they need the extension; after all, "poop happens" to everyone. My only rule is that students need to request an extension in advance; they can't just ignore the assignment without comment. If they make the request, it will be approved: no explanation or excuses required. When extensions are requested, I ask the students how much additional time they need, and I give it to them. Sometimes they do not ask for enough time, and I grant them more than they initially requested. For instance, I have seen students who believe they can write an entire paper in one or two days. That is wrong. I recognize this overly ambitious (and late) deadline and give them more time than they initially requested. In those circumstances, I remind them that I want them to produce high-quality work. It is better that they take a week to complete a high-quality paper than two days to produce a poor-quality paper. In short, I am treating students like professional learners who need time to be able to think, write, and produce.

As this "poop happens" extension implies, my assignments always come with due dates. After all, I cannot grade every assignment by every student on the last day of the semester. In addition, turning in everything at once does not allow the students to reflect, edit, or improve their work. Due dates serve a purpose. They motivate people to sit and complete the work, which can be especially difficult if it is intellectually challenging. Additionally, when faculty create the syllabus for all our courses, we often try to spread out when big assignments are due to give us time to grade. This prevents us from getting too many papers on the same day. Thus, due dates are important—but flexibility is, too. Of course, some universities do not allow their faculty this privilege. In those circumstances, I would advise faculty to implement as flexible a policy as their employer permits.

In spring 2023, even with the generous extension policy, most students turned their work in on time. Only 15 out of 170 assignments submitted requested an extension in advance. In addition, another 37 assignments were turned in late without an extension. In short, about 70% of my students' work was turned in on time. The students listened when I warned them that due dates help them stay on top of their work and that extensions and late work can pile up and lead to bad outcomes.

For students who missed the due date without requesting the extension, they were met with warmth and kindness, not punitive measures. I discussed with them why they were late and how much time they

needed to complete the work. The goal is to come up with a realistic schedule that avoids them falling farther behind in their work. When setting new due dates, we discussed what other work they needed to complete in all of their classes and what the state of their non-academic lives looked like. While I did penalize those students for failing to communicate with me in an appropriate timeframe, the penalties were small. Students could turn in any assignment throughout the semester up until the day after the final exam. Though they were penalized for this late work, and they were not given much feedback on the material turned in at the very end of the semester, their work was still accepted.

All students are given two sets of due dates: flexible and hard dates. The flexible due date is the date the assignment is due. If a student tells me they will be missing this before the due date, then the students get a mutually agreed upon extension. If a student does not give me a warning, then they get a small penalty which maxes out at one letter grade deduction and a new, mutually agreed upon due date. The hard due date is the day after the final exam is administered. After that, grades must be submitted to the Registrar's Office and it is not right to hold up the entire class's grades for tardy students. The goal is to treat the students with the necessary kindness and respect that enables them to turn in their best quality work and demonstrate their learning. It also teaches them the lessons of both flexible and inflexible due dates which more honestly mirror the corporate world they will likely enter.

Communication

The bedrock upon which the pedagogy of kindness is set is respect. Our students greatly value respect, and disrespect can derail an entire class. To demonstrate respect, faculty and students need to engage in an open and honest dialogue. Communication is key to making the system work. It is especially important in an online asynchronous course where students learn on their own in isolation. To help them succeed, professors must work to break down communication barriers between students and teachers. If professors want to become intellectual mentors to their students, then we must also create safe spaces where we can listen to our students about what is going on in their lives.

Azad Ali and David Smith (2015) succinctly describe the problem of social isolation in an online class as such: "Students can complete courses and programs without the need to see any of their professor [sic] or their colleagues" (p. 14). Kristopher M. Joyce and Abbie Brown (2009) demonstrate that this sense of isolation harms student learning. Humans are social creatures who need to be in contact with their fellow learners. A real connection can boost student success (Joyce & Brown, 2009). Ali and Smith (2015) argue that a lack of connection can help explain why online classes have higher rates of withdrawals than face-to-face courses. The in-person environment can keep a student engaged in a way that is difficult to replicate in one's house, by oneself, on one's computer.

Despite the loneliness of it, online asynchronous courses are still appealing to many students who need flexibility. After all, those classes enable students to engage with their classwork on their own schedule. But as the semester wears on, that flexibility can lead to isolation. Katie Burke and Stephen Larmar (2020) note that to counter this loneliness, faculty should engage "the students in open-ended and genuine dialogue centred in caring" (p. 6). Faculty members can limit the isolation through group work activities, discussion boards, or online discussion sessions, but those are often poor substitutes for real-world connections. Faculty need to do more. One thing we can do is offer a safe space to listen to students. In this learning environment, the faculty member must do more than set up the learning management system, assign the work, and grade the assignments. The professor must meaningfully engage the student.

As part of my pedagogical strategy, I grade student-professor interactions while letting students guide such interactions. Thus, each student is graded on their ability to reach out to me each week. However, students get to choose what "reaching out" means for them. Students get the option to choose to send me an email, call me, text me, schedule a meeting with me, or join my online office hours. I will meet them at whatever method of communication they want as long as they communicate.

This communication serves as a powerful way for me to interact with my students. For most students, on most weeks, there is little for them to report. In those instances, students can choose to tell me what they learned, what

they loved, or just tell me that they did the work! But those low-stakes communications help pave the way for the harder stuff: when students miss work, fall behind, or do not understand the work. It also opens a pathway for me to ask students if they are happy with their grades. Often, in the case of students who are earning low grades, they are unhappy but never thought to ask the professor how to improve. By setting a foundation of having regular, low-stakes communication, I open the door to having important conversations with students about their work. It also gives me a chance to ask students how they are doing in other parts of their lives, from the academic to the professional. Sometimes, through these conversations, situations emerge where I can help. This regular communication allows me to serve as a friendly, helpful face for the college.

Logistically, this communication means that I spend my workdays with my gradebook open. Whenever I get a call, text, or email from a student, I log that it happened. I keep pertinent notes to help me guide our future conversations and close the loop with any issues arising. Each week on Mondays I update students' grades in the learning management system and send an email telling them whether they earned a point for communication. Updating the weekly grades takes at least an hour a week, often more at the start of the semester. But this investment in time goes a long way toward building our relationship.

Caring about students requires much self-care. As Moorhouse and Tiet (2021) note, it is important that instructors do not link their quick and constant communication with the students' perception that faculty care. After all, this will overburden any faculty member, and "a healthy and sustainable pedagogy of care must include deliberate care for ourselves" (p. 222). Because self-care is important, I do not respond after regular business hours—and my students know that. A student who sends me a text message at 2 am will not receive a response until the next day at 9 am. An email that comes on a Saturday will not get a response until Monday. A phone call that is made at 7 pm will get my voicemail. I care about my students and treat them professionally and with respect, but I put on my own oxygen mask first. This rule of responding during business hours is explained on the syllabus and students learn to accept it quickly. I promise students to respond within 24 hours of their outreach (except on weekends), but I make it clear that they will not get a response outside of business hours.

Enforcement of normal working hours is important for instructor mental health. It also means that the first thing I must do every workday morning is look for student emails and text messages. Communication with my online asynchronous students takes priority throughout my workday. Student communication, through phone calls, text messages, and emails, is the focus of my day. In online asynchronous courses, where readings can be planned out and videos recorded at the start of the semester, this can free up instructor time to devote to those individual connections.

Finding individual connections is especially important for online instructors in community colleges. At schools with a similar demographic to Bronx Community College, where most students have jobs and other real-world responsibilities, getting to know the student is key to helping them succeed. My students are usually juggling numerous activities at the same time and having a supporter there to guide them is important for making them feel like they belong. Simple messages of encouragement to students can often work to reduce tension and bring them back to the classroom. Each semester I have been able to bring a student back who quit for a few weeks because of an overwhelming life event. If I had not reached out and encouraged them, they would likely have not returned.

Fostering a good relationship with a student early can help resolve problems that arise later. Almost all students experience a problem in the middle or end of the semester. Workloads increase during midterm and final exam periods. Stress rises. Setting a foundation of respectful and open communication can help improve the instructor-student relationship which can allow the instructor to genuinely support the student. Teaching requires students to buy into their own learning and education and a good first step to improve student buy-in is for the professor to truly believe in the student.

Conclusion

Creating a kind and caring working environment should not be the exclusive benefit of faculty members from administrators. It should be available to students

Kindness and Community *continued*

from their professors as well. Catherine Denial's pedagogy of kindness is a useful framework for thinking about how to improve college-level teaching and make a better working environment (2019). It can create a space where students feel seen and respected, which can encourage them to work harder and believe in their own education. It can also work to mitigate some of the stresses engrained in the collegiate experience. Faculty members can serve as cheerleaders, supporters, and educators.

This pedagogy is especially helpful for online asynchronous teaching, where students are more likely to be isolated and withdrawn from the classroom experience. Thus, professors should work at applying a welcoming environment that meets students where they are and helps them succeed. Creating a welcoming syllabus, flexible and realistic deadlines, and a system of open communication helps students' mental health while also ensuring that they complete the work. As Denial (2019) states: "It costs me nothing to be kind." This is a valuable lesson which we should not forget.

Kindness and Community *continued*

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Kindness and Community *continued*

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Footnotes

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