

## What To Do Moving Forward: Strategies for Course Policy Modifications After a Crisis\*

In addition to caring for your own well-being and openly acknowledging a tragic event with your students, there are a number of tangible ways instructors might consider modifying their syllabus or lesson plans immediately after a crisis on their campus. This resource contains examples of policies and adaptations you may consider. These strategies and ideas are not meant to be read as recommendations that every instructor should adopt, but rather as possibilities that instructors can individually assess and adapt to their own teaching context where appropriate.

When modifying your course policies or syllabus after a crisis, it is helpful to keep a few basic principles of trauma-aware pedagogy in mind. The overarching aim of these principles is to cultivate a sense of safety in the classroom, especially when this sense of safety may have been disrupted by traumatic events. Some key principles of trauma-informed teaching include:

1. **Empathy** – take time to understand what students are experiencing and allow them to process those experiences together.
2. **Flexibility** – be patient and forgiving with students if they can't progress through the course as you initially imagined they would.
3. **Autonomy** – give students choices about their engagement, work, and participation that can help them feel in control.
4. **Clarity** – reduce unknowns by over-communicating about what will stay the same and what will change as a result of the event.
5. **Transparency** – be transparent about why you chose to respond to the event in the way that you did.
6. **Consistency** – be as predictable and reliable as possible, perhaps leaning on existing classroom habits or routines to create a sense of familiarity.

Learn more about [Trauma-Informed Pedagogy](#) from the University of Michigan. Next, you will find concrete examples of ways you might consider embedding these principles into your class.

### Modifying the Course Content & Timeline

- If classes are canceled due to a crisis, communicate to students where you plan to pick up after classes resume in terms of content and activities.
- Consider pushing the course plan back a week rather than asking students to prepare for two weeks at once (e.g., the week that was missed and the current week). Then identify content to skip later on, if possible.
  - Explain to students why you chose to cut that section and provide a few resources for them to study on their own if they're interested.
  - Revise assessments accordingly so that students aren't evaluated on material not covered.

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\* Adapted from: [Course Policy Modifications After a Crisis: Practical Strategies for Returning to Class](#) by Michael McCreary at Michigan State University | Creative Commons BY-NC-SA

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- Review your course learning goals and think about what is truly necessary and what can be left out this time. Students' cognitive load will be reduced after a crisis and class time might be better spent focusing on a few key topics rather than trying to get everything covered.
  - Reduce the quantity of readings and other work required for students to prepare for class where possible.

## **Modifying Assessments**

- Consider emphasizing low-stakes formative assessments like in-class activities and discussion posts over high-stakes summative assessments like quizzes and exams. This could be done by allowing students to choose to weight their formative assessments more heavily or by making certain summative assessments optional.
  - Reduce anxiety of high-stakes tests by making them take-home, or allowing students to choose a certain number of questions or problems on an existing exam to respond to as opposed to taking the entire thing.
- Consider grading certain assessments pass/fail.
- Make sure to revise assessments to ensure they don't evaluate students on material that may have been skipped or not covered in detail due to an altered schedule.
- Consider giving students options about how and when to complete existing assessments.
  - For example, allowing them to work individually or in groups. Or allowing them to submit in various formats (written, video, audio, creative, etc.)
  - Create new deadlines for existing assessments in conversation with students.
- If using grading rubrics, consider how to adjust expectations in light of the situation, and communicate any changes to students.

## **Modifying Late Work Policies**

- Consider removing late work penalties, where possible. Ask students to stay in touch with you if they need an extension.
- Give students the option to throw out a certain number of assessments, or for certain assessments to be graded pass/fail.

## **Modifying Attendance and Participation Policies**

- Consider dropping or loosening any required attendance policies. For example, increase the number of days that can be missed before incurring a penalty. You may decide to ask students to email you or their TA, when possible, if they need to miss class. Make explicit that they do not need to provide a reason for missing class.
  - Clearly explain to students what they need to do to make up for any classes they may miss. Try to be respectful of students' cognitive load as you create this policy so that work doesn't pile up when they miss class.
  - Consider giving everyone full credit for the "participation" score of their grade, or provide students with a variety of options about what will count as participation, especially for those who do not feel like speaking in class.
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