Teaching, Self-Care, and Reflective Practice during a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT Political science courses often address difficult topics that can take an emotional and psychological toll on students, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization. There is a growing awareness of the importance of reflective and self-care practices in teaching, especially considering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health. However, this is a rarely discussed topic in political science. This article discusses the results of our pedagogical research on the emotional impact of learning about atrocities, the challenges of studying during a global pandemic, and the benefits of self-care activities (e.g., meditation) for student well-being. Our research is based on two different courses and includes student self-reflections and our analysis of class discussions. We conclude that our students struggle with the emotional costs of studying difficult topics (especially during the pandemic) and are receptive to doing self-care activities and find them beneficial for their mental health.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has increased existing concerns about students' mental health. There also is a growing realization that these issues are not separate from the classroom.[1] Moreover, the topics often studied in political science—war, climate change, genocide, and human rights violations—can have an emotional and psychological toll on students that affects not only their well-being but also their academic performance.[2] However, in political science, there is limited discussion about this aspect of teaching or strategies to help students manage these challenges. The emotional aspect and toll of teaching and learning about atrocities is a neglected area of research in political science education.

This article discusses the results of our pedagogical research on the emotional impact of learning about human rights abuses, the emotional challenges students are facing during a global pandemic, and the benefits of self-care activities (e.g., meditation and mindfulness) for student well-being under all circumstances. Our research is based on two different courses taught during the COVID-19 pandemic at Wofford College, a residential liberal arts college with approximately 1,700 students located in upstate South Carolina.[3] We used student self-reflections and notes on class discussions to analyze their reactions to self-care pedagogy.[4] We also provide examples of how to incorporate self-care into specific activities and assignments. We conclude from our experience that our students struggle with the emotional costs of studying difficult topics in all contexts but especially during the pandemic, that they are receptive to doing self-care activities, and they find these activities beneficial for their mental health.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing concern about student mental health and its impact on student learning has contributed to the development of two related areas of research. One area focuses on examining the potential emotional and psychological aspects of studying depressing and difficult topics. With the notable exception of a recent article by Zartner (2019), most of the literature on the emotional effects of teaching and studying traumatic events and depressing topics comes from the fields of psychology and social work. The other area of writing, which has expanded greatly since the beginning of the pandemic, is on developing tools, strategies, and approaches that focus on students' mental well-being, also known as "self-care." The focus on self-care acknowledges that elements in the classroom (e.g., the material being studied) as well as outside of the classroom (e.g., the collective trauma of the global pandemic) can negatively affect students' well-being, which in turn can negatively affect their academic performance. There can be multiple sources of trauma for students, which can interact.

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doi:10.1017/S1049096521001918

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Social work and psychology scholarship has documented that people working with trauma survivors may experience secondary traumatic stress that can parallel post-traumatic stress disorder (Zurbriggen 2011). More recent research suggests that although the risk is less for students studying traumatic material, there is evidence that even indirect trauma—such as exposure to first-hand accounts of traumatic events—can produce levels of distress (Zurbriggen 2011, 223). As Zartner (2019) explained, there are three main responses to repeated exposure to depressing topics: burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization. Burnout can result from sustained interaction with human suffering and usually is linked to professions such as humanitarian workers but also has been documented in those who study traumatic events (Zartner 2019, 348–49). Compassion fatigue develops from repeated exposure to serious problems leading to feelings of helplessness and fatalism. Vicarious traumatization can result from direct interactions with survivors of trauma and may disrupt the worldview of people, including increasing fears about personal safety and emotional stress (Cunningham 2004). Although the risks for burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization will vary among students, research has shown that all three are possible reactions (Zartner 2019).

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Scholars and practitioners have suggested various strategies to reduce the likelihood of students experiencing burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization. These strategies entail providing a theoretical framework to help students understand their reactions, being careful in presenting material, providing opportunities to take positive action, and developing classroom techniques to focus on the positive (Cunningham 2004; Zartner 2019; Zurbriggen 2011). However, this article focuses specifically on strategies related to self-care. Self-care involves activities such as meditation, mindfulness exercises, exercise, and reflective writing (Dorroll 2020). Napoli and Bonifas (2011, 637) discussed how incorporating self-care into the course curriculum can "help counteract distressing experiences and thereby prevent negative outcomes."

In response to the global pandemic, there has been increased concern about the mental well-being of students, especially given the challenges of remote learning. In 2020, multiple news articles and pedagogical sources—including blog posts by Tumminio Hansen (2020) and Lee (2020)—addressed the challenges of managing the mental, emotional, and psychological consequences of living through a life-altering crisis. These articles, like those written by Ahmad (2020a, 2020b), validate the need for intentional self-care in the classroom under all circumstances and contextualize the trauma and difficulty students are facing during the pandemic. Recent pedagogical publications also discuss the consequences of the "pandemic pedagogy" for students and the need to support them (e.g., Smith and Hornsby 2021, 2). We expanded on these ideas and this research to explore students' responses to self-care practices.

SELF-CARE IN THE CLASSROOM: TWO CASE STUDIES

Self-care is important in relation to topics studied and in the broader context, such as the turmoil and anxiety caused by the pandemic. Case Study 1, from Dorroll's Spring 2020 course "Ethnography of Religion in the Middle East and North Africa" (MENA) region, examines the challenges experienced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic and in adapting to remote learning. Case Study 2, from Vanderhill's Spring 2021 course "Revolution and Regime Change," focuses more on challenges that result from studying disturbing and depressing topics. Each class had between 20 and 25 students (i.e., the average class size at Wofford) and was representative of the college's student population (i.e., 80% white, 20% multicultural/international).

Case Study 1: Adapting to Remote Learning with Virtual Activities and Self-Care

In Case Study 1, Dorroll incorporated self-care and virtual, asynchronous activities into her introductory course. This course teaches students how to use the ethnographic method—participant observation, interviews, writing vignettes, and applying to ethical review boards such as the Institutional Review Board—and how to read ethnographic accounts focused on MENA communities. The course satisfies several general education, major/minor, and program requirements across the humanities and social sciences. A wide range of students from across campus, including students from all four levels—first year to senior—took the course. Dorroll had planned to incorporate a discussion in the course about the importance of self-care for ethnographers doing fieldwork before the pandemic.[5] However, because of the added stress and anxiety caused by COVID-19 (e.g., students abruptly required to move off campus and classes switching to remote learning), Dorroll included well-being activities for students while also teaching skills they could apply in the field as ethnographers. Therefore, the self-care pedagogy shifted from the theoretical to the practical and immediate, focusing on how students cope with the challenges of remote learning and create self-care routines.

For students who were now living at home, Dorroll adapted the preexisting virtual ethnography activity based on the documentary film, *Divorce Iranian Style* (Mir-Hosseini and Longinotto 1998), by making it asynchronous and online. The chaotic situation made asynchronous work vital—students had extra time to do the assignments and did not have to log on at the same time because internet access and time zones varied for those now living off campus. To prepare for this activity, students first read assigned introductory articles on ethnography and specific texts about ethnographic fieldwork in the MENA region followed by several class lectures on the methodology of ethnography (before classes went online).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Students asynchronously watched the documentary film about divorce in Iran. By using the documentary to create a virtual ethnographic experience, Dorroll was able to transport the students, predominantly from the American South, to Tehran, Iran. As they watched the film, students were to imagine that they were in the courtroom doing participant observation. They watched a 10-minute segment of the documentary three times. In the first viewing, students focused on the visual cues and describing the scene. This also was an opportunity for them to listen to Persian without trying to read the translations. During the second viewing, Dorroll asked the students to read the English subtitles and focus their notes on describing the storylines. In the third viewing, students watched to add more to their notes and to be prepared to write a summary. At the end of the three viewings, they wrote a summary of their field notes for the Moodle blog, which all students could see to cultivate collective understanding and mimic a classroom discussion.

The next assignment involved reflections on the documentary, ethnography, and self-care during fieldwork. The students then wrote a reflection on the virtual ethnography assignment. This was a short 5-minute task that allowed students to say what they liked and did not like and what they learned from the assignment; their statements were uploaded to the Moodle blog, again available for the class to read.

A follow-up assignment asked students to read how ethnographers use self-care in the field (Tremblay 2014) as well as readings on self-care and self-compassion during the pandemic. In addition, students had a "self-care day" in which they were instructed to do an activity that helped them to relax. Dorroll also offered students the opportunity to do an optional self-care activity to count toward one of their required blog posts. They could choose a well-being activity from the online Resilience Project Well-Being Exercises toolkit, which has several methodically guided well-being activities including meditations, breathing exercises, and gratitude letters (Wofford College 2018).

After the self-care day, students were asked to reflect on the Moodle blog: How do you as ethnography students sustain yourself in this class and within this semester as a whole? How important is self-care in this moment? The Moodle blog allowed students to create an online community and a space to vent. Their reflections illustrated both the difficulties they were experiencing by leaving campus mid-semester and the value of self-care in the classroom. Many students discussed how they were struggling with remote learning. For example, one student wrote:

> Ever since online classes started up, I have been very overwhelmed with work and trying to manage my time. It has been a very hard adjustment as we have been given many assignments to do on own our time in most of my classes, so it has been a learning process as I am not used to having as much work on my own time. As a result, I have not been giving myself much time for self-care because I always feel like I need to be working ahead and completing an assignment (Student A).

Another student stated that:

> Being a college student…requires one to put in work and, at times, it can be very stressful. I definitely feel that moving to remote learning has also intensified this stress for many, making school feel overwhelming and very time-consuming…I think with the society we live in now where everything is output-based, it is very easy to engage in negative self-talk" (Student B).

Other students wrote about how being away from campus resulted in them being in an environment that was not supportive for learning. "I am in an environment that is not motivating for me, which only stresses me out. It is hard for me to get motivated to complete assignments and even hard for me to get motivated for self-care" (Student C). Many of the issues that students experienced in the pandemic are similar to the turmoil and uncertainty that an ethnographer experiences during fieldwork.

The effects of the pandemic on students' stress levels and mental well-being varied depending on their circumstances. This student's reflection highlights the challenges that some were facing in their personal life:

> Although I have been able to put my mind at ease these past three weeks, this week is expected to be the peak of COVID-19…which scares me so much. So, while I'm trying to take care of my mental health, it's difficult not to think of the fact that my dad is surrounded by COVID-19 patients every day and has a chance of contracting it himself. Although this is difficult to get out of my head, car rides have been helping me and I feel that my mental health is going in the right direction. I think this is one of the best times to insist that people are taking self-care days and taking care of their mental health, as I think this virus could easily get the best of people. Although I worry about my dad and my schoolwork, I find ways to take care of my mental health and distract myself through calming activities, all of which make me very happy in such an unhappy time (Student D).

Multiple students acknowledged the benefits of the self-care day for their well-being. "Our self-care day was an amazing reminder of how important taking time for ourselves is. It gave me so much energy and happiness and made me decide to give myself more time like this in my life" (Student E). Another stated, "Being able to take a walk during the middle of the day helped to reduce the stress from both assignments and the uncertainty of the future. It is something I have placed in my self-care routine since returning home…and it has been something that has kept me centered and focused throughout this time" (Student F). Other students commented that they wished other classes focused on self-care because of its value in reducing their stress. The combination of virtual ethnography and self-care was a crucial adaptation during the spring of 2020.

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Case Study 2: Self-Care and Reflective-Essay Activity

Due to the pandemic, Case Study 2 in Vanderhill's "Revolution and Regime Change" course occurred under the combined

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conditions of online and in-person teaching. In contrast to Case Study 1, this course was an upper-level international affairs major course with students who were primarily juniors and seniors satisfying either international affairs or government major/minor requirements. The course covers a range of topics, including how authoritarian regimes use repression, torture, and executions to maintain power. In addition to scholarly readings on the topic, students watched one episode of the documentary series, *The Dictator's Playbook* (Stevenson 2019), which is a vivid and detailed account of the atrocities committed by twentieth-century dictators (e.g., Francisco Franco). They also read a current Human Rights Watch report about torture in Turkey. To explore how students manage the emotional and psychological elements of studying this topic and to investigate how self-care exercises may help them, there was a multipart assignment and discussion. After watching the documentary episode on their own, they also read an excerpt from Zartner's (2019) article that introduced them to the concepts of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization. After completing both tasks, students did one self-care exercise from the Resilience Project Well-Being Exercises toolkit (Wofford College 2018).

Based on their reflective essays, class discussion, and an in-class anonymous survey (conducted via a Zoom poll), most students expressed some experience with compassion fatigue and burnout. In response to the survey question, "Have you ever experienced burnout or compassion fatigue from reading/listening/watching the news or studying course material," 90% responded yes. Multiple students in their reflective essay discussed how difficult and emotional it was for them to study about human rights atrocities. For example, one student wrote:

> When studying very deep, dark, or disturbing topics, it is very easy to allow yourself to slip into a depressed and numbing place. It is something I have experienced…I believe it is incredibly important for us to study and understand such topics and events so that we can recognize their horror and appreciate the people who suffered, but also it can allow us to expand our minds and hearts and allow us to become more compassionate. We must prevent such events like the ones listed above from happening again. However, in studying some of these topics, I have experienced a wide range of emotions. I have cried, felt pain, numb, sad, empty, everything—and some of that really scared me, but at the same time, I have been able to find a sense of pride and hope even in the dimmest parts of our world's history (Student G).

Another student reflected on how the pandemic restrictions (i.e., the campus was on lockdown during this assignment) made it more difficult to also be studying depressing topics:

> I think burnout has been a real issue for a lot of students especially with these COVID semesters. The reason being is if you are dealing with a topic that is emotionally straining, it can become very difficult to deal with especially if you have other things in your life on top of that. Once you start experiencing the symptoms of burnout, "isolation, physical exhaustion, and eroded idealism" and are following the guidelines of COVID, which are stay indoors and isolated as much as possible, then I know for a fact that you have experienced the isolation and physical-exhaustion symptoms because they are ones that I have most definitely felt (Student H).

Students also expressed how they valued learning about the concepts of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization because they realized they were not alone in their emotional reactions. Knowing about these concepts provided a theoretical framework to help in understanding their reactions (Cunningham 2004, 308).

Although there is a growing awareness of the importance of self-care, it nevertheless is unusual to assign a self-care exercise as homework. Therefore, we asked students to reflect on their experiences with self-care in both their reflective essay and anonymously in the survey. In response to one survey question, slightly less than 50% of students said they practiced some form of self-care (e.g., meditation, yoga, or mindfulness). About 30% of the class discussed how doing the self-care exercise made them feel less stressed, more relaxed, and calmer. One student's comment that "While meditating, I felt a sense of warmth and calmness within myself which helped me sleep better that evening!" is representative of what many expressed in their reflective essay. Only three out of 20 students found no benefit from doing the self-care exercise or struggled to complete it. During the in-class discussion, students overwhelmingly expressed support for having more conversations about the emotional toll of studying difficult topics and the value of self-care exercises.

CONCLUSION

This article focuses on the challenges of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the emotional aspect of studying human rights atrocities. Our research provides preliminary evidence that students may have emotional responses to studying traumatic or depressing topics. In addition, the student reflections highlight how living through the pandemic makes dealing with disturbing topics more difficult for them. The pandemic has created a terrain of uncertainty and high levels of anxiety for students, which potentially intensified their responses to studying traumatic material.

We found that it is important to develop ways to innovate and build compassion into a course, especially when it has emotional content. According to our students, directly acknowledging their emotional reaction to course material and giving them tools to manage their responses and the stress of living through a global pandemic were beneficial for their well-being and academic work. Although both case studies occurred during the pandemic, which heightened awareness of the trauma-informed teaching, the emotional costs of studying difficult topics are likely to be true under all circumstances. Therefore, focusing on self-care pedagogy will have value even in a post-pandemic world.

According to our students, directly acknowledging their emotional reaction to course material and giving them tools to manage their responses and the stress of living through a global pandemic were beneficial for their well-being and academic work.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001918 Published online by Cambridge University Press

There are clear limits to our conclusions, especially because both case studies were conducted at the same private, small, residential liberal arts college during the pandemic. Self-care pedagogy is important at Wofford College, but we also view it as beneficial for students in other contexts, especially when they are experiencing stressful personal circumstances (e.g., attending college while working full time). Overall, there is limited research on the pedagogical benefits of self-care practices for student learning. Therefore, we need further research on and additional innovation for how to institutionalize self-care pedagogy across disciplines and curricula. This article aims to be a starting point to add to the pedagogical conversation. ■

NOTES

1. According to the American College Health Association "Fall 2018 National College Health Assessment" (LeBlanc and Marques 2019), 63% of college students reported experiencing overwhelming anxiety.
2. As other scholars have noted (e.g., Sheffield 2011/2012), teaching about these topics also can have an emotional cost. However, the focus of this article is students.
3. This project was partially funded by a summer faculty research grant from Wofford College.
4. The research complied with Wofford College's Institutional Review Board requirements; all participating students provided written informed consent at the beginning of the semester.
5. Dorroll teaches a standalone course on self-care and uses activities and approaches of self-care pedagogy in all of her classes. Self-care pedagogy allows the instructor to address wellness, capacity, and resilience as they pertain to course content, life on campus, and world events. This pedagogy can be used by any instructor in any context.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096521001918 Published online by Cambridge University Press