

Application for the Truly Innovative Teaching Award: Slowing Down to Dig Deep, Connect, and Thrive

Section 1: Contact Information

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Availability: I plan to attend the Teaching Academy Gala at 4pm on May 8, 2024.

Section 2: Innovation and Application

Description

The innovation was the integration of principles of *trauma-informed education* and concepts from *The Slow Professor* (Berg & Seeber, 2016) to revise and teach an asynchronous online course in which students engaged in deep learning, deep connection, and in which we thrived as a learning community.

Trauma-informed education involves perspectives and practices which realize, recognize, and respond to the impact of trauma and toxic stress and ensure that institutions avoid retraumatization (SAMHSA, 2014). Trauma-informed frameworks have proliferated in education over the last decades gaining increasing attention in the last years as critical responses to the pandemic and many other widespread crises that have impacted students since. In practice, much trauma-informed work involves recognizing the neurobiology of trauma and stress, focusing on building relationships and creating environments that support physical and emotional regulation.

The concept of *The Slow Professor* holds many parallels to trauma-informed practice, recognizing the ways in which high stress, high speed, high demand institutions and environments undermine deep thinking, deep learning, deep connection, and inhibit thriving. In Fall 2023, I integrated these two concepts to transform my course and my work in response to challenging circumstances.

Context

In August 2023, I was assigned to teach an online asynchronous course that was new to me and for which I had little time to prepare. At the same time, I was unexpectedly asked to take over as the Interim Co-Director in the School of Social Work amid a challenging situation for our unit in which students had experienced substantial disruption. Overwhelmed by the many transitions, I knew that to survive, teach well, and ensure student learning, I would need to fundamentally adjust the course and my approach to teaching. This would require an intentional response to the overload I and my students were experiencing, and intentional opportunities for meaningful connection and fun while supporting deep learning and application of content.

While my experience last fall with slowing down to dig deep, connect, and thrive was a response to a unique situation, it is likely to be useful to any faculty who are grappling with the challenging realities of post-pandemic instruction. Working with faculty across campus as a Digital Faculty Fellow, I have seen how concerns with student mental health, student engagement, and structural/institutional challenges are ever-present companions to teaching. The solution is not necessarily to do more, but to do differently. My experience last fall suggests that we can improve engagement, improve learning, and thrive by slowing down, focusing our efforts, building community, and infusing joy into our work.

Implementation

In facing what would undoubtedly be a challenging semester, I drew upon the core principles for trauma-informed education and concepts from “The Slow Professor.” This led me to focus on four key areas.

Purpose and Alignment. With multiple competing demands and stressors threatening my focus and my student’s attention, my first set of actions focused on the imperative to clearly articulate a purpose for our course and to align everything we would do to this purpose. I revisited our course objectives and created an engaging introductory video which vividly illustrated the “why” for the course. Given that this was a theory-based course, I introduced the concept of theory as a lens, a metaphor that we could return to throughout the class. Having clarified the why for the course, I ruthlessly revised the syllabus to ensure that everything we read, watched, or did clearly supported that purpose. I cut out several resources and assignments and substantially revised others that threatened to distract from our core purpose. I created lecture videos that were brief, simple, and focused on vividly illustrating key points. Through these actions, I reduced unnecessary tasks and stimuli, setting the stage for deep work toward our goals.

Clarity and Predictability. I worked to build a course structure and assignments that were clear and predictable. Instead of reflective journals which asked students to apply different course theories to different situations, in a range of different formats throughout the semester, students submitted three “application of theory to case” assignments. The case, the instructions, and the format of each application of theory to case was identical, although students would need to analyze and apply new theoretical models in each submission; these assignments culminated in an assessment paper that used the analysis skills they developed. This shift allowed students to spend their mental energy for these assignments on deep and thoughtful application of the course theories rather than assignment formatting or case details. I also worked to ensure that every module and assignment utilized the same format, and that they were clear, simple, and visually engaging. Trauma and toxic stress tend to represent unpredictable situations in which circumstances exceed our capacity to cope; clear expectations and predictability are antidotes to this and critical tools which allow us to slow down and deepen our engagement.

Cultivating Connections. I knew that students would need intentional opportunities to connect with me and one another in this asynchronous environment. I began by creating welcome announcements in which I shared course information but also introduced myself as a person (photos, some personal information); as a class, we put pins on a digital map along with personal photos or quick text introductions to share places that held meaning for each of us. Weekly announcements were sent every Monday and office hours were heavily promoted as opportunities to chat and connect about the course or in other ways. In lieu of the typical whole-class discussion format, students were placed into groups of 5-6 with whom they would engage in all six of the discussion assignments for the semester. Two of these discussions would involve them meeting live via zoom as a group, dialoguing, and submitting a written reflection on their dialogue. Other discussions required video or photo submissions to which they would reply. The goal of these efforts was to ensure that students understood and deeply felt their place within a community of learners, even in the asynchronous online environment.

Fun. While it was important for me to acknowledge the challenges and stressors I and my students were facing, it was equally important for me to convey that we would and could experience joy in our learning together. I sought opportunities to integrate humor and fun into our work. I utilized silly costumes or props for weekly announcements or mini lectures. I hid “easter eggs” (opportunities for negligible extra credit) that created a game-like opportunities for

students to dig deep into course materials. I encouraged and celebrated student creativity in more open-ended discussion assignments. These small moments of levity supported engagement for myself and my students, deepening our connections with one another and the content.

Section 3: Teaching Academy Influence

The practices I integrated and implemented last fall were the direct result of several formative experiences I have had through the Teaching Academy. As a brand-new assistant professor in 2016, one of the first sessions I ever attended at the Teaching Academy was a talk and book group utilizing “The Slow Professor”. Admittedly, its core lessons have not been at the center of most of my work over the last 7 years. I have, more often than not, been consumed by the *rat race*; and yet, the central premise of the book has stayed with me.

In 2023, I had the opportunity to attend two Teaching Academy events with Flower Darby: “Stronger than Before” which focused on post-pandemic resilience in higher education and “Wired for Connection” which provided concrete practices to support meaningful relationships in online teaching. Lessons from these sessions about the power of visuals, the need for students to see instructors as people, and the ways in which relationships support learning, stayed with me. I also attended sessions by Jean Twenge on teaching iGeneration which reshaped the way I thought about creating and providing content for students.

Shortly after these experiences, I facilitated a book group for the Teaching Academy around the text “Trauma-Informed Pedagogies.” While I was already familiar with the concept of trauma-informed education, this experience began to shift my understanding of applying these principles at NMSU and in my own teaching. My engagement with faculty across campus who were struggling with the realities of the moment and saw their students struggling along with them was a powerful reset for me which set the stage for my experiences in fall 2023. It was time to practice what I had been learning and preaching.

Section 4: Impact and Outcomes

Teaching Human Behavior and the Social Environment course in Fall 2023 was one of the most rewarding teaching experiences I have had to date. Student course evaluations directly reflected the impact of the shifts I made.

Purpose and Alignment
The professor challenged me to dig deep and push myself on how to apply theory. This helped me learn to use different ways to practice.
The assignments we completed challenged me to think deeply about topics in order for successful completion.
I put a lot of thought into my written assignments about the Case Studies. This helped me think about how I will make decisions as a professional.
The supplemental content was not too much as to be overwhelming, but super relevant and took the textbook reading to a deeper level.
Clarity and Predictability
This course stands out in my first term as an MSW student in many positive ways...the trait that distinguished it most from my other courses: It was organized! This helped me tremendously, as someone who struggles with ADHD and is wearing a lot of hats right now...I sincerely appreciate the work she put in to making this course digestible for new MSW students-- many of us working adults with families. Thank you, Dr. G!

Many of the items in the previous list greatly supported my learning...but structure was probably primary. Dr. G has always been exceedingly and outstandingly organized and communicative...this structure and organization empowered me to succeed in this course and learn. I am grateful!!
Modules had the same format each week which was easy to access, predictable and allowed me to focus on the content in them rather than work to make sense of them.
The overall course design was very carefully put together. I cannot stress how important this was for me as a student. I would love to have this professor for all my other classes!
Cultivating Connection
Her feedback on assignments and the ways she offered support made me feel that she genuinely cares about how her students are doing in the class. I have never had a professor offer such genuine support and care to her students.
The weekly announcements with heads up to what's coming in the course made me feel supported from the instructor and kept me grounded in the progression of the course.
My discussion group clicked immediately through shared childhood experiences. It made it much easier to open up and feel safe to discuss the topics and how those topics were relevant
Working with a group was very helpful to learn different ideas and appreciate how different people approach different theories/ideas.
Fun
I loved the humor within every lecture video/announcement. It made it memorable and more willing to read/watch it.
The professor provided lecture videos that were engaging and fun to watch/listen to! The professor provided motivation and content that you wanted to read and pay attention to.
Her supplemental videos were always entertaining and engaging.

Outside of student feedback, the impact of these practices on student learning was clear in their performance. Students did well in the course overall, although this was not because they found the content easy. Indeed, several students struggled early on but found opportunities to improve and develop their skills through the predictable, scaffolded nature of the course. Overall, class averages on assignments which utilized the same structure but assessed different content over the semester improved dramatically. Quiz averages increased from 86% to 97%. Averages on the Application of Theory to Case Assignments and the culminating Assessment paper reflected progressive growth from 88% to 95%. Students who struggled the most with these assignments early on demonstrated the most substantial growth; the three students who scored below 70% on their first submission all achieved scores above 95% by the final submission.

	First Submission	Second Submission	Third Submission
Student A	65	87	96
Student B	57	85	97
Student C	60	75	100

Finally, the impact that these practices had on me as an instructor is important to acknowledge. Trauma-informed education and the “slow” movement hold value, not only for their impact on students, but for their potential to support the wellbeing of teachers. The reality that my efforts to simplify, slow down, connect, and enjoy teaching yielded positive student outcomes *and* a sustainable yet deeply rewarding teaching experience is instructive. Given the pressures that many faculty feel as they navigate similar challenges, it is worth considering how we can all slow down, dig deep, connect, and thrive.